

THE SAFETY-CURTAIN

CHAPTER I

THE ESCAPE

A GREAT shout of applause went through the crowded hall as the Dragon-Fly Dance came to an end, and the Dragon-Fly, with quivering, iridescent wings, flashed away.

It was the third encore. The dance was a marvellous one, a piece of dazzling intricacy, of swift and unexpected subtleties, of almost superhuman grace. It must have proved utterly exhausting to any ordinary being; but to that creature of fire and magic it was no more than a glittering fantasy, a whirl too swift for the eye to follow or the brain to grasp.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" asked a man in the front row.

"It's a boy, of course," said his neighbour, shortly.

He was the only member of the audience who did not take part in that third encore. He sat squarely in his seat throughout the uproar, watching the stage with piercing grey eyes that never varied in their stern directness. His brows were drawn above them—thick,

straight brows that spoke to a formidable strength of purpose. He was plainly a man who was accustomed to hew his own way through life, despising the trodden paths, overcoming all obstacles by grim persistence.

Louder and louder swelled the tumult. It was evident that nothing but a repetition of the wonder-dance would content the audience. They yelled themselves hoarse for it; and when, light as air, incredibly swift, the green Dragon-Fly darted back, they outdid themselves in the madness of their welcome. The noise seemed to shake the building.

Only the man in the front row with the iron-grey eyes and iron-hard mouth made no movement or sound of any sort. He merely watched with unchanging intentness the face that gleamed, ashen white, above the shimmering metallic green tights that clothed the dancer's slim body.

The noise ceased as the wild tarantella proceeded. There fell a deep hush, broken only by the silver notes of a flute played somewhere behind the curtain. The dancer's movements were wholly without sound. The quivering, whirling feet scarcely seemed to touch the floor. It was a dance of inspiration, possessing a strange and irresistible fascination, a weird and meteoric rush, that held the onlookers with bated breath.

It lasted for perhaps two minutes, that intense and trance-like stillness; then, like a stone flung into glassy depths, a woman's scream rudely shattered it, a piercing, terror-stricken scream that brought the

rapt audience back to earth with a shock as the liquid music of the flute suddenly ceased.

"Fire!" cried the voice. "Fire! Fire!"

There was an instant of horrified inaction, and in that instant a tongue of flame shot like a fiery serpent through the closed curtains behind the dancer. In a moment the cry was caught up and repeated in a dozen directions, and even as it went from mouth to mouth the safety-curtain began to descend.

The dancer was forgotten, swept as it were from the minds of the audience as an insect whose life was of no account. From the back of the stage came a roar like the roar of an open furnace. A great wave of heat rushed into the hall, and people turned like terrified, stampeding animals and made for the exits.

The Dragon-Fly still stood behind the footlights, poised as if for flight, glancing this way and that, shimmering from head to foot in the awful glare that spread behind the descending curtain. It was evident that retreat behind the scenes was impossible, and in another moment or two that falling curtain would cut off the only way left.

But suddenly, before the dancer's hunted eyes, a man leapt forward. He held up his arms, making himself heard in clear command above the dreadful babel behind him.

"Quick!" he cried. "Jump!"

The wild eyes flashed down at him, wavered, and were caught in his compelling gaze. For a single instant—the last—the trembling, glittering figure

seemed to hesitate, then like a streak of lightning leapt straight over the footlights into the outstretched arms.

They caught and held with unwavering iron strength. In the midst of a turmoil indescribable the Dragon-Fly hung quivering on the man's breast, the gauze wings shattered in that close, sustaining grip. The safety-curtain came down with a thud, shutting off the horrors behind, and a loud voice yelled through the building assuring the seething crowd of safety.

But panic had set in. The heat was terrific. People fought and struggled to reach the exits.

The dancer turned in the man's arms and raised a deathly face, gripping his shoulders with clinging, convulsive fingers. Two wild dark eyes looked up to his, desperately afraid, seeking reassurance.

He answered that look briefly with stern composure.

"Be still! I shall save you if I can."

The dancer's heart was beating in mad terror against his own, but at his words it seemed to grow a little calmer. Quiveringly the white lips spoke.

"There is a door—close to the stage—a little door—behind a green curtain—if we could reach it."

"Ah!" the man said.

His eyes went to the stage, from the proximity of which the audience had fled affrighted. He spied the curtain.

Only a few people intervened between him and

it, and they were struggling to escape in the opposite direction.

"Quick!" gasped the dancer.

He turned, snatched up his great-coat, and wrapped it about the slight, boyish figure. The great dark eyes that shone out of the small white face thanked him for the action. The clinging hands slipped from his shoulders and clasped his arm. Together they faced the fearful heat that raged behind the safety-curtain.

They reached the small door, gasping. It was almost hidden by green drapery. But the dancer was evidently familiar with it. In a moment it was open. A great burst of smoke met them. The man drew back. But a quick hand closed upon his, drawing him on. He went blindly, feeling as if he were stepping into the heart of a furnace, yet strangely determined to go forward, whatever came of it.

The smoke and the heat were frightful, suffocating in their intensity. The roar of the unseen flames seemed to fill the world.

The door swung to behind them. They stood in seething darkness.

But again the small clinging hand pulled upon the man.

"Quick!" the dancer cried again.

Choked and gasping, but resolute still, he followed. They ran through a passage that must have been on the very edge of the vortex of flame, for behind them ere they left it a red light glared.

It showed another door in front of them with which

the dancer struggled a moment, then flung open. They burst through it together, and the cold night-wind met them like an angel of deliverance.

The man gasped and gasped again, filling his parched lungs with its healing freshness. His companion uttered a strange, high laugh, and dragged him forth into the open.

They emerged in a narrow alley, surrounded by tall houses. The night was dark and wet. The rain pattered upon them as they staggered out into a space that seemed deserted. The sudden quiet after the awful turmoil they had just left was like the silence of death.

The man stood still and wiped the sweat in a dazed fashion from his face. The little dancer reeled back against the wall, panting desperately.

For a space neither moved. Then, terribly, the silence was rent by a crash and the roar of flames. An awful redness leapt across the darkness of the night, revealing each to each.

The dancer stood up suddenly and made an odd little gesture of farewell; then, swiftly, to the man's amazement, turned back towards the door through which they had burst but a few seconds before.

He stared for a moment—only a moment—not believing he saw aright; then with a single stride he reached and roughly seized the small, oddly-shaped figure.

He heard a faint cry, and there ensued a sharp struggle against his hold; but he pinioned the thin young arms without ceremony, gripping them fast

In the awful, flickering glare above them his eyes shone downwards, dominant, relentless.

"Are you mad?" he said.

The small dark head was shaken vehemently, with gestures curiously suggestive of an imprisoned insect. It was as if wild wings fluttered against captivity.

And then all in a moment the struggling ceased, and in a low, eager voice the captive began to plead.

"Please, please let me go! You don't know—you don't understand. I came—because—because you called. But I was wrong—I was wrong to come. You couldn't keep me—you wouldn't keep me—against my will!"

"Do you want to die, then?" the man demanded. "Are you tired of life?"

His eyes still shone piercingly down, but they read but little, for the dancer's were firmly closed against them, even while the dark cropped head nodded a strangely vigorous affirmative.

"Yes, that is it! I am so tired—so tired of life! Don't keep me! Let me go—while I have the strength!" The little, white, sharp-featured face, with its tight-shut eyes and childish, quivering mouth, was painfully pathetic. "Death can't be more dreadful than life," the low voice urged. "If I don't go back—I shall be so sorry afterwards. Why should one live—to suffer?"

It was piteously spoken, so piteously that for a moment the man seemed moved to compassion. His hold relaxed; but when the little form between his

hands took swift advantage and strained afresh for freedom he instantly tightened his grip.

"No, no!" he said, harshly. "There are other things in life. You don't know what you are doing. You are not responsible."

The dark eyes opened upon him then—wide, reproachful, mysteriously far-seeing. "I shall not be responsible—if you make me live," said the Dragon-Fly, with the air of one risking a final desperate throw.

It was almost an open challenge, and it was accepted instantly, with grim decision. "Very well. The responsibility is mine," the man said briefly. "Come with me!"

His arm encircled the narrow shoulders. He drew his young companion unresisting from the spot. They left the glare of the furnace behind them, and threaded their way through dark and winding alleys back to the throbbing life of the city thoroughfares, back into the whirl and stress of that human existence which both had nearly quitted—and one had strenuously striven to quit—so short a time before.

CHAPTER II

NOBODY'S BUSINESS

"My name is Merryon," the man said, curtly. "I am a major in the Indian Army—home on leave. Now tell me about yourself!"

He delivered the information in the brief, aggres-

sive fashion that seemed to be characteristic of him, and he looked over the head of his young visitor as he did so, almost as if he made the statement against his will.

The visitor, still clad in his great-coat, crouched like a dog on the hearthrug before the fire in Merryon's sitting-room, and gazed with wide, unblinking eyes into the flames.

After a few moments Merryon's eyes descended to the dark head and surveyed it critically. The collar of his coat was turned up all around it. It was glistening with rain-drops and looked like the head of some small, furry animal.

As if aware of that straight regard, the dancer presently spoke, without turning or moving an eyelid.

"What you are doesn't matter to anyone except yourself. And what I am doesn't matter either. It's just—nobody's business."

"I see," said Merryon.

A faint smile crossed his grim, hard-featured face. He sat down in a low chair near his guest and drew to his side a small table that bore a tray of refreshments. He poured out a glass of wine and held it towards the queer, elfin figure crouched upon his hearth.

The dark eyes suddenly flashed from the fire to his face. "Why do you offer me—that?" the dancer demanded, in a voice that was curiously vibrant, as though it strove to conceal some overwhelming emotion. "Why don't you give me—a man's drink?"

"Because I think this will suit you better," Merryon

said; and he spoke with a gentleness that was odd at variance with the frown that drew his brows.

The dark eyes stared up at him, scared and defiant for the passage of several seconds; then, very suddenly, the tension went out of the white, pinched face. It screwed up like the face of a hurt child, and all in a moment the little, huddled figure collapsed on the floor at his feet, while sobs—a woman's quivering, piteous sobs—filled the silence of the room.

Merryon's own face was a curious mixture of pity and constraint as he set down the glass and stooped forward over the shaking, anguished form.

"Look here, child!" he said, and whatever else was in his voice it certainly held none of the hardness habitual to it. "You're upset—unnerved. Don't cry so! Whatever you've been through, it's over. No one can make you go back. Do you understand? You're free!"

He laid his hand, with the clumsiness of one little accustomed to console, upon the bowed black head.

"Don't!" he said again. "Don't cry so! What the devil does it matter? You're safe enough with me. I'm not the sort of bounder to give you away."

She drew a little nearer to him. "You—you're not a bounder—at all," she assured him between her sobs. "You're just—a gentleman. That's what you are!"

"All right," said Merryon. "Leave off crying!"

He spoke with the same species of awkward kindness that characterized his actions, and there must have been something strangely comforting in his speech, for the little dancer's tears ceased as abruptly

as they had begun. She dashed a trembling hand across her eyes.

"Who's crying?" she said.

He uttered a brief, half-grudging laugh. "That's better. Now drink some wine! Yes, I insist! You must eat something, too. You look half-starved."

She accepted the wine, sitting in an acrobatic attitude on the floor facing him. She drank it, and an odd sparkle of mischief shot up in her great eyes. She surveyed him with an impish expression—much as a grasshopper might survey a toad.

"Are you married?" she enquired, unexpectedly.

"No," said Merryon, shortly. "Why?"

She gave a little laugh that had a catch in it. "I was only thinking that your wife wouldn't like me much. Women are so suspicious."

Merryon turned aside, and began to pour out a drink for himself. There was something strangely elusive about this little creature whom Fortune had flung to him. He wondered what he should do with her. Was she too old for a foundling hospital?

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly.

She did not answer.

He looked at her, frowning.

"Don't!" she said. "It's ugly. I'm not quite forty. How old are you?"

"What?" said Merryon.

"Not—quite—forty," she said again, with extreme distinctness. "I'm small for my age, I know. But I shall never grow any more now. How old did you say you were?"

Merryon's eyes regarded her piercingly. "I should like the truth," he said, in his short, grim way.

She made a grimace that turned into an impish smile. "Then you must stick to the things that matter," she said. "That is—nobody's business."

He tried to look severe, but very curiously failed. He picked up a plate of sandwiches to mask momentary confusion, and offered it to her.

Again, with simplicity, she accepted, and there fell a silence between them while she ate, her eyes again upon the fire. Her face, in repose, was the saddest thing he had ever seen. More than ever did it make him think of a child that had been hurt.

She finished her sandwich and sat for a while lost in thought. Merryon leaned back in his chair, watching her. The little, pointed features possessed no beauty, yet they had that which drew the attention irresistibly. The delicate charm of her dancing was somehow expressed in every line. There was fire too—a strange, bewitching fire—behind the thick black lashes.

Very suddenly that fire was turned upon him again. With a swift, darting movement she knelt up in front of him, her clasped hands on his knees.

"Why did you save me just now?" she said. "Why wouldn't you let me die?"

He looked full at her. She vibrated like a winged creature on the verge of taking flight. But her eyes—her eyes sought his with a strange assurance, although they saw in him a comrade.

"Why did you make me live when I wanted to

die?" she insisted. "Is life so desirable? Have you found it so?"

His brows contracted at the last question, even while his mouth curved cynically. "Some people find it so," he said.

"But you?" she said, and there was almost accusation in her voice. "Have the gods been kind to you? Or have they thrown you the dregs—just the dregs?"

The passionate note in the words, subdued though it was, was not to be mistaken. It stirred him oddly, making him see her for the first time as a woman rather than as the fantastic being, half-elf, half-child, whom he had wrested from the very jaws of Death against her will. He leaned slowly forward, marking the deep, deep shadows about her eyes, the vivid red of her lips.

"What do you know about the dregs?" he said.

She beat her hands with a small, fierce movement on his knees, mutely refusing to answer.

"Ah, well," he said, "I don't know why I should answer either. But I will. Yes, I've had dregs—dregs—and nothing but dregs, for the last fifteen years."

He spoke with a bitterness that he scarcely attempted to restrain, and the girl at his feet nodded—a wise little feminine nod.

"I knew you had. It comes harder to a man, doesn't it?"

"I don't know why it should," said Merryon, moodily.

"I do," said the Dragon-Fly. "It's because we were made to boss creation. See? You're one of the bosses, you are. You've been led to expect a lot, and because you haven't had it you feel you've been cheated. Life is like that. It's just a thing that mocks at you. I know."

She nodded again, and an odd, will-o'-the-wis smile flitted over her face.

"You seem to know—something of life," the man said.

She uttered a queer, choking laugh. "Life is big, big swindle," she said. "The only happy people in the world are those who haven't found it out. But you—you say there are other things in life beside suffering. How did you know that if—if you've never had anything but dregs?"

"Ah!" Merryon said. "You have me there."

He was still looking full into those shadowy eyes with a curious, dawning fellowship in his own.

"You have me there," he repeated. "But I do know. I was happy enough once, till——" He stopped.

"Things went wrong?" insinuated the Dragon-Fly, sitting down on her heels in a childish attitude of attention.

"Yes," Merryon admitted, in his sullen fashion. "Things went wrong. I found I was the son of a thief. He's dead now, thank Heaven. But he dragged me under first. I've been at odds with life ever since."

"But a man can start again," said the Dragon-Fly, with her air of worldly wisdom.

"Oh, yes, I did that." Merryon's smile was one of exceeding bitterness. "I enlisted and went to South Africa. I hoped for death, and I won a commission instead."

The girl's eyes shone with interest. "But that was luck!" she said.

"Oh, yes; it was luck of a sort—the damnable, unsatisfactory sort. I entered the Indian Army, and I've got on. But socially I'm practically an outcast. They're polite to me, but they leave me outside. The man who rose from the ranks—the fellow with a shady past—fought shy of by the women, just tolerated by the men, covertly despised by the youngsters. That's the sort of person I am. It galled me once. I'm used to it now."

Merryon's grim voice went into grimmer silence. He was staring sombrely into the fire, almost as if he had forgotten his companion.

There fell a pause; then, "You poor dear!" said the Dragon-Fly, sympathetically. "But I expect you are like that, you know. I expect it's a bit your own fault."

He looked at her in surprise.

"No, I'm not meaning anything nasty," she assured him, with that quick smile of hers whose sweetness he was just beginning to realize. "But after a bad knock-out like yours a man naturally looks for trouble. He gets suspicious, and a snub or two does the rest. He isn't taking any more. It's a pity you're

my affairs," he said, after a moment. "It seems to me that yours are the most important just now. Aren't you going to tell me anything about them?"

She gave a small, emphatic shake of the head. "I should have been dead by this time if you hadn't interfered," she said. "I haven't got any affairs."

"Then it's up to me to look after you," Merryon said, quietly.

But she shook her head at that more vigorously still. "You look after me!" Her voice trembled on a note of derision. "Sure, you're joking!" she protested. "I've looked after myself ever since I was eight."

"And made a success of it?" Merryon asked.

Her eyes shot swift defiance. "That's nobody's business but my own," she said. "You know what I think of life."

Merryon's hand closed slowly upon hers. "There seems to be a pair of us," he said. "You can't refuse to let me help you—for fellowship's sake."

The red lips trembled suddenly. The dark eyes fell before his for the first time. She spoke almost under her breath. "I'm too old—to take help from a man—like that."

He bent slightly towards her. "What has age to do with it?"

"Everything." Her eyes remained downcast; the hand he held was trying to wriggle free, but he would not suffer it.

"Circumstances alter cases," he said. "I accepted the responsibility when I saved you."

"But you haven't the least idea what to do with me," said the Dragon-Fly, with a forlorn smile. "You ought to have thought of that. You'll be going back to India soon. And I—and I——" She stopped still stubbornly refusing to meet the man's eyes.

"I am going back next week," Merryon said.

"How fine to be you!" said the Dragon-Fly. "You wouldn't like to take me with you now as—as *valet de chambre*?"

He raised his brows momentarily. Then: "Would you come?" he asked, with a certain roughness, although he suspected her of trifling.

She raised her eyes suddenly, kindled and eager. "Would I come!" she said, in a tone that said more than words.

"You would?" he said, and laid an abrupt hand on her shoulder. "You would, eh?"

She knelt up swiftly, the coat that enveloped her falling back, displaying the slim, boyish figure, the active, supple limbs. Her breathing came through parted lips.

"As your—your servant—your valet?" she panted.

His rough brows drew together. "My what? Good heavens, no! I could only take you in one capacity.

She started back from his hand. For a moment sheer horror looked out from her eyes. Then, almost in the same instant, they were veiled. She caught her breath, saying no word, only dumbly waiting.

"I could only take you as my wife," he said, still in that half-bantering, half-embarrassed fashion on his. "Will you come?"

She threw back her head and stared at him. "Marry you! What, really? Really?" she questioned, breathlessly.

"Merely for appearances' sake," said Merryon, with grim irony. "The regimental morals are somewhat easily offended, and an outsider like myself can't be too careful."

The girl was still staring at him, as though at some novel specimen of humanity that had never before crossed her path. Suddenly she leaned towards him, looking him full and straight in the eyes.

"What would you do if I said 'Yes'?" she questioned, in a small, tense whisper.

He looked back at her, half interested, half amused. "Do, urchin? Why, marry you," he said.

"Really marry me?" she urged. "Not make-believe?"

He stiffened at that. "Do you know what you're saying?" he demanded, sternly.

She sprang to her feet with a wild, startled movement; then, as he remained seated, paused, looking down at him sideways, half-doubtful, half-confiding. "But you can't be in earnest!" she said.

"I am in earnest." He raised his face to her with a certain doggedness, as though challenging her to detect in it aught but honesty. "I may be several kinds of a fool," he said, "but I am in earnest. I'm no great catch, but I'll marry you if you'll have me. I'll protect you, and I'll be good to you. I can't

promise to make you happy, of course, but—anyway, I shan't make you miserable."

"But—but——" She still stood before him though hovering on the edge of flight. Her lips were trembling, her whole form quivering and scintillating in the lamplight. She halted on the word as if uncertain how to proceed.

"What is it?" said Merryon.

And then, quite suddenly, his mood softened.

He leaned slowly forward.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he said. "I'm not a heady youngster. I shan't gobble you up."

She laughed at that—a quick, nervous laugh. "And you won't beat me either? Promise!"

He frowned at her. "Beat you! I?"

She nodded several times, faintly smiling. "Yes, you, Mr. Monster! I'm sure you could."

He smiled also, somewhat grimly. "You're wrong, madam. I couldn't beat a child."

"Oh, my!" she said, and threw up her arms with a quivering laugh, dropping his coat in a heap on the floor. "How old do you think this child is?" she questioned, glancing down at him in her sidelong, speculative fashion.

He looked at her hard and straight, looked at the slim young body in its sheath of iridescent green that shimmered with every breath she drew, and very suddenly he rose.

She made a spring backwards, but she was too late. He caught and held her.

"Let me go!" she cried, her face crimson.

"But why?" Merryon's voice fell curt and direct. He held her firmly by the shoulders.

She struggled against him fiercely for a moment, then became suddenly still. "You're not a brute, are you?" she questioned, breathlessly. "You—you'll be good to me? You said so!"

He surveyed her grimly. "Yes, I will be good to you," he said. "But I'm not going to be fooled. Understand? If you marry me, you must play the part. I don't know how old you are. I don't greatly care. All I do care about is that you behave yourself as the wife of a man in my position should. You're old enough to know what that means, I suppose?"

He spoke impressively, but the effect of his words was not quite what he expected. The point of a very red tongue came suddenly from between the red lips, and instantly disappeared.

"That all?" she said. "Oh, yes; I think I can do that. I'll try, anyway. And if you're not satisfied—well, you'll have to let me know. See? Now let me go, there's a good man! I don't like the feel of your hands."

He let her go in answer to the pleading of her eyes, and she slipped from his grasp like an eel, caught up the coat at her feet, and wriggled into it.

Then, impishly, she faced him, buttoning it with nimble fingers the while. "This is the garment of respectability," she declared. "It isn't much of a fit, is it? But I shall grow to it in time. Do you know, I believe I'm going to like being your wife?"

"Why?" said Merryon.

She laughed—that laugh of irrepressible gaiety that had surprised him before.

"Oh, just because I shall so love fighting battles for you," she said. "It'll be grand sport."

"Think so?" said Merryon.

"Oh, you bet!" said the Dragon-Fly, with confidence. "Men never know how to fight. The poor things—men!"

He laughed himself at that—his grim, grudging laugh. "It's a world of fools, Puck," he said.

"Or knaves," said the Dragon-Fly, wisely. And with that she stretched up her arms above her head and laughed again. "Now I know what it feels like," she said, "to have risen from the dead."

CHAPTER III

COMRADES

THERE came the flash of green wings in the cypress and a raucous scream of jubilation as the bold parakeet in the compound flew off with the choicest sweetmeat on the *tiffin*-table in the veranda. There were always sweets at *tiffin* in the major's bungalow. Mrs. Merryon loved sweets. She was wont to say that they were the best remedy for home-sickness she knew.

Not that she ever was home-sick. At least, no one ever suspected such a possibility, for she had a sm-

and a quip for all, and her laughter was the gayest in the station. She ran out now, half-dressed, from her bedroom, waving a towel at the marauder.

"That comes of being kind-hearted," she declared, in the deep voice that accorded so curiously with the frothy lightness of her personality. "Everyone takes advantage of it, sure."

Her eyes were grey and Irish, and they flashed over the scene dramatically, albeit there was no one to see and admire. For she was strangely captivating, and perhaps it was hardly to be expected that she should be quite unconscious of the fact.

"Much too taking to be good, dear," had been the verdict of the Commissioner's wife when she had first seen little Puck Merryon, the major's bride.

But then the Commissioner's wife, Mrs. Paget, was so severely plain in every way that perhaps she could scarcely be regarded as an impartial judge. She had never flirted with anyone, and could not know the joys thereof.

Young Mrs. Merryon, on the other hand, flirted quite openly and very sweetly with every man she met. It was obviously her nature so to do. She had doubtless done it from her cradle, and would probably continue the practice to her grave.

"A born wheedler," the colonel called her; but his wife thought "saucy minx" a more appropriate term, and wondered how Major Merryon could put up with her shameless trifling.

As a matter of fact, Merryon wondered himself sometimes; for she flirted with him more than all in

that charming, provocative way of hers, coaxed laughed at him, brilliantly eluded him. She w perch daintily on the arm of his chair when he busy, but if he so much as laid a hand upon her was gone in a flash like a whirling insect, not to re till he was too absorbed to pay any attention to. And often as those daring red lips mocked him, were never offered to his even in jest. Yet was sh finished a coquette that the omission was n obvious. It seemed the most natural thing in world that she should evade all approach to intim They were comrades—just comrades.

Everyone in the station wanted to know Merry bride. People had begun by being distant, but phase was long past. Puck Merryon had stor the citadel within a fortnight of her arrival, no quite knew how. Everyone knew her now. She v everywhere, though never without her husband, found himself dragged into gaieties for which he scant liking, and sought after by people who never seemed aware of him before. She had, in sh become the rage, and so gaily did she revel in triumph that he could not bring himself to deny the fruits thereof.

On that particular morning in March he had g to an early parade without seeing her, for there been a regimental ball the night before, and she danced every dance. Dancing seemed her one sion, and to Merryon, who did not dance, the had been an unmitigated weariness. He had at l in sheer boredom, joined a party of bridge-play

with the result that he had not seen much of his young wife throughout the evening.

Returning from the parade-ground, he wondered if he would find her up, and then caught sight of her waving away the marauders in scanty attire on the veranda.

He called a greeting to her, and she instantly vanished into her room. He made his way to the table set in the shade of the cluster-roses, and sat down to await her.

She remained invisible, but her voice at once accosted him. "Good morning, Billikins! Tell the *kit* you're ready! I shall be out in two shakes."

None but she would have dreamed of bestowing so frivolous an appellation upon the sober Merryon. But from her it came so naturally that Merryon scarcely noticed it. He had been "Billikins" to her throughout the brief three months that had elapsed since their marriage. Of course, Mrs. Paget disapproved, but then Mrs. Paget was Mrs. Paget. She disapproved of everything young and gay.

Merryon gave the required order, and then sat in solid patience to await his wife's coming. She did not keep him long. Very soon she came lightly out and joined him, an impudent smile on her sallow little face, dancing merriment in her eyes.

"Oh, poor old Billikins!" she said, commiseratingly. "You were bored last night, weren't you? I wonder if I could teach you to dance."

"I wonder," said Merryon.

His eyes dwelt upon her in her fresh white muslin.

What a child she looked! Not pretty—no pretty; but what a magic smile she had!

She sat down at the table facing him, and let her elbows upon it. "I wonder if I could!" she again, and then broke into her sudden laugh.

"What's the joke?" asked Merryon.

"Oh, nothing!" she said, recovering herself. suddenly came over me, that's all—poor old M. Paget's face, supposing she had seen me night."

"Didn't she see you last night? I thought were more or less in the public eye," said Merryon.

"Oh, I meant after the dance," she explained. felt sort of wound up and excited after I got in. And I wanted to see if I could still do it. I'm to say I can," she ended, with another little laugh.

"Can what?" asked Merryon.

Her dark eyes shot him a tentative glance. "You be shocked if I tell you."

"What was it?" he said.

There was insistence in his tone—the insistence which he had once compelled her to live against will. Her eyelids fluttered a little as it reached her, but she cocked her small pointed chin not standing.

"Why should I tell you if I don't want to?" demanded.

"Why shouldn't you want to?" he said.

The tip of her tongue shot out and in again. "You never took me for a lady, did you?" she asked half-defiantly.

"What was it?" repeated Merryon, sticking to the point.

Again she grimaced at him, but she answered, "Oh, I only—after I'd had my bath—lay on the floor and ran round my head for a bit. It's not a bit difficult, once you've got the knack. But I got thinking of Mrs. Paget—she does amuse me, that woman. Only yesterday she asked me what Puck was short for, and I told her Elizabeth—and then I got laughing so that I had to stop."

Her face was flushed, and she was slightly breathless as she ended, but she stared across the table with brazen determination, like a naughty child expecting a slap.

Merryon's face, however, betrayed neither astonishment nor disapproval. He even smiled a little as he said, "Perhaps you would like to give me lessons in that also? I've often wondered how it was done."

She smiled back at him with instant and obvious relief.

"No, I shan't do it again. It's not proper. But I will teach you to dance. I'd sooner dance with you⁹ than any of 'em."

It was naively spoken, so naively that Merryon's faint smile turned into something that was almost genial. What a youngster she was! Her freshness was a perpetual source of wonder to him—when he remembered whence she had come to him.

"I am quite willing to be taught," he said. "But it must be in strict privacy."

She nodded gaily.

"Of course. You shall have a lesson to-night when we get back from the Burtons' dinner. I'm sorry you were bored, Billikins. You shan't again."

That was her attitude always, half-maternal, half-quizzing, as if something about him amused her; always anxious to please him, always ready to set wishes before her own, so long as he did not attempt to treat her seriously. She had left all that serious in that other life that had ended with fall of the safety-curtain on a certain night in England many æons ago. Her personality now was light gossamer, irresponsible as thistle-down. The duties of life passed her by. She seemed wholly unaware of them.

"You'll be quite an accomplished dancer by time everyone comes back from the Hills," remarked, balancing a fork on one slender hand-finger. "We'll have a ball for two—every night."

"We!" said Merryon.

She glanced at him.

"I said 'we.'"

"I know you did." The man's voice had suddenly dogged ring; he looked across at the vivid, poppy face with the suggestion of a frown between eyes.

"Don't do that!" she said, lightly. "Never that, Billikins! It's most unbecoming behavior. What's the matter?"

"The matter?" he said, slowly. "The matter is that you are going to the Hills for the hot wea-

with the rest of the women, Puck. I can't keep you here."

She made a rude face at him.

"Preserve me from any cattery in the Hills!" she said. "I'm going to stay with you."

"You can't," said Merryon.

"I can," she said.

He frowned still more.

"Not if I say otherwise, Puck."

She snapped her fingers at him and laughed.

"I am in earnest," Merryon said. "I can't keep you here for the hot weather. It would probably kill you."

"What of that?" she said.

He ignored her frivolity.

"It can't be done," he said. "So you must make the best of it."

"Meaning you don't want me?" she demanded unexpectedly.

"Not for the hot weather," said Merryon.

She sprang suddenly to her feet.

"I won't go, Billikins!" she declared, fiercely. "I just won't!"

He looked at her, sternly resolute.

"You must go," he said, with unwavering decision.

"You're tired of me! Is that it?" she demanded.

He raised his brows. "You haven't given me much opportunity to be that, have you?" he said.

A great wave of colour went over her face. She put up her hand as though instinctively to shield it.

"I've done my best to—to—to——" She stopped.

became piteously silent, and suddenly he saw she was crying behind the sheltering hand.

He softened almost in spite of himself.

"Come here, Puck!" he said.

She shook her head dumbly.

"Come here!" he repeated.

She came towards him slowly, as if against will. He reached forward, still seated, and drew to him.

She trembled at his touch, trembled and staggered, yet in the end she yielded.

"Please," she whispered; "please!"

He put his arm round her very gently, yet with determination, making her stand beside him.

"Why don't you want to go to the Hills?" said.

"I'd be frightened," she murmured.

"Frightened? Why?"

"I don't know," she said, vaguely.

"Yes, but you do know. You must know. Tell me!" He spoke gently, but the stubborn note was in his voice and his hold was insistent. "Leave me crying and tell me!"

"I'm not crying," said Puck.

She uncovered her face and looked down at him through tears with a faintly mischievous smile.

"Tell me!" he reiterated. "Is it because you don't like the idea of leaving me?"

Her smile flashed full out upon him on the instant.

"Goodness, no! Whatever made you think that?" she demanded, briskly.

He was momentarily disconcerted, but he recovered himself at once.

"Then what is your objection to going?" he asked.

She turned and sat down conversationally on the corner of the table.

"Well, you know, Billikins, it's like this. When I married you—I did it out of pity. See? I was sorry for you. You seemed such a poor, helpless sort of creature. And I thought being married to me might help to improve your position a bit. You see my point, Billikins?"

"Oh, quite," he said. "Please go on!"

She went on, with butterfly gaiety.

"I worked hard—really hard—to get you out of your bog. It was a horrid deep one, wasn't it, Billikins? My! You were floundering! But I've pulled you out of it and dragged you up the bank a bit. You don't get sniffed at anything like you used, do you, Billikins? But I daren't leave you yet. I honestly daren't. You'd slip right back again directly my back was turned. And I should have the pleasure of starting the business all over again. I couldn't face it, my dear. It would be too disheartening."

"I see," said Merryon. There was just the suspicion of a smile among the rugged lines of his face. "Yes, I see your point. But I can show you another if you'll listen."

He was holding her two hands as she sat, as though he feared an attempt to escape. For though Puck sat quite still, it was with the stillness of a trapped creature that waits upon opportunity.

and tore her hands free. "I've a good mind to run away from you and never come back. It's what you deserve, and what you'll get, if you aren't careful!"

She was gone with the words—gone like a flashing insect disturbing the silence for a moment, and leaving a deeper silence behind.

Merryon looked after her for a second or two, and then philosophically continued his meal. But the slight frown remained between his brows. The veranda seemed empty and colourless now that she was gone.

CHAPTER IV

FRIENDS

THE Burtons' dinner-party was a very cheerful affair. The Burtons were young and newly-married, and they liked to gather round them all the youth and gaiety of the station. It was for that reason that Puck's presence had been secured, for she was the life of every gathering; and her husband had been included in the invitation simply and solely because from the very outset she had refused to go anywhere without him. It was the only item of her behaviour of which worthy Mrs. Paget could conscientiously approve.

As a matter of fact, Merryon had not the smallest desire to go, but he would not say so; and all through the evening he sat and watched his young wife with a curious hunger at his heart. He hated to think that he had hurt her.

There was no sign of depression about Puck ever, and he alone noticed that she never once g in his direction. She kept everyone up to a p frivolity that certainly none would have a without her, and an odd feeling began to Merryon, a sensation of jealousy such as he had before experienced. They seemed to forget, them, that this flashing, brilliant creature was

She seemed to have forgotten it also. Or only that deep-seated, inimitable coquetry of he prompted her thus to ignore him?

He could not decide; but throughout the e the determination grew in him to make this one clear to her. Trifle as she might, she must be to understand that she belonged to him, and alone. Comrades they might be, but he h vested right in her, whether he chose to act or not.

They returned at length to their little gir bungalow—the Match-box, as Puck called it—o under a blaze of stars. The distance was not and Puck despised rickshaws.

She flitted by his side in her airy way, ch inconsequently, not troubling about respons elusive as a fairy and—the man felt it in the i fever of his veins—as maddeningly attractive.

They reached the bungalow. She went up steps to the rose-twined veranda as though she fl on wings of gossamer. "The roses are all a Billikins," she said. "They look like alabaster, i they?"

She caught a cluster to her and held it against her cheek for a moment.

Merryon was close behind her. She seemed to realize his nearness quite suddenly, for she let the flowers go abruptly and flitted on.

He followed her till, at the farther end of the veranda, she turned and faced him. "Good night. Billikins," she said, lightly.

"What about that dancing-lesson?" he said.

She threw up her arms above her head with a curious gesture. They gleamed transparently white in the starlight. Her eyes shone like fire-flies.

"I thought you preferred dancing by yourself," she retorted.

"Why?" he said.

She laughed a soft, provocative laugh, and suddenly, without any warning, the cloak had fallen from her shoulders and she was dancing. There in the starlight, white-robed and wonderful, she danced as, it seemed to the man's fascinated senses, no human had ever danced before. She was like a white flame—a darting, fiery essence, soundless, all absorbing, all entrancing.

He watched her with pent breath, bound by the magic of her, caught, as it were, into the innermost circle of her being, burning in answer to her fire, yet so curiously enthralled as to be scarcely aware of the ever-mounting, ever-spreading heat. She was like a mocking spirit, a will-o'-the-wisp, luring him, luring him—whither?

The dance quickened, became a passionate whirl

"Good-night, Billikins," she said, her voice very small and humble.

He came to her without haste, realizing that she had given the game into his hands. She did not shrink from him, but she raised an appealing face. And oddly the man's heart smote him. She looked so pathetically small and childish, standing there.

But the blood was still running fiercely in his veins, and that momentary twinge did not cool him. Child she might be, but she had played with fire, and she alone was responsible for the conflagration that she had started.

He drew near to her; he took her, unresisting, into his arms.

She cowered down, hiding her face away from him. "Don't, Billikins! Please—please, Billikins!" she begged, incoherently. "You promised—you promised——"

"What did I promise?" he said.

"That you wouldn't—wouldn't"—she spoke breathlessly, for his hold was tightening upon her—"gobble me up," she ended, with a painful little laugh.

"I see." Merryon's voice was deep and low. "And you meantime are at liberty to play any fool game you like with me. Is that it?"

She was quivering from head to foot. She did not lift her face. "It wasn't—a fool game," she protested. "I did it because—because—you were so horrid this morning, so—so cold-blooded. And I—and I—wanted to see if—I could make you care."

"Make me care!" Merryon said the words over

And suddenly Merryon came to himself—was furiously, overwhelmingly ashamed.

"God forgive me!" he said, and let her go.

She tottered a little, covering her face with her hands, sobbing like a hurt child. But she did not try to run away.

He flung round upon his heel and paced the veranda in fierce discomfort. Beast that he was—brute beast to have hurt her so! That piteous sobbing was more than he could bear.

Suddenly he turned back to her, came and stood beside her. "Puck—Puck, child!" he said.

His voice was soft and very urgent. He touched the bent, dark head with a hesitating caress.

She started away from him with a gasp of dismay; but he checked her.

"No, don't!" he said. "It's all right, dear. I'm not such a brute as I seem. Don't be afraid of me!"

There was more of pleading in his voice than he knew. She raised her head suddenly, and looked at him as if puzzled.

He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed her wet cheeks with clumsy tenderness. "It's all right," he said again. "Don't cry! I hate to see you cry."

She gazed at him, still doubtful still sobbing a little. "Oh, Billikins!" she said, tremulously, "why did you?"

"I don't know," he said, "I was mad. It was your own fault, in a way. You don't seem to realize

that I'm as human as the rest of the world. I don't defend myself. I was an infernal brute myself go like that."

"Oh, no, you weren't, Billikins!" Quite expectedly she answered him. "You couldn't be. Men are like that. And I'm glad you're here. But—but"—she faltered a little—"I want to feel you're safe, too. I've always felt—ever since I jumped into your arms that night—that you—that you were on the right side of the safety-curtain. You are, aren't you? Oh, please say you are! But I know you are. She held out her hands to him with a quivering assurance of confidence. "If you'll forgive me for fooling you," she said, "I'll forgive you—for being fooled. That's a fair offer, isn't it? Don't think any more about it!" Her rainbow smile transformed her face, but her eyes sought his anxious

He took the hands, but he did not attempt to draw her nearer. "Puck!" he said.

"What is it?" she whispered, trembling.

"Don't!" he said. "I won't hurt you. I would never hurt a hair of your head. But, child, wouldn't it be safer—easier for both of us—if—if we lived together instead of apart?"

He spoke almost under his breath. There was no hint of mastery about him at that moment, only gentleness that pleaded with her as with a frightened child.

And Puck went nearer to him on the instant, and she drew him closer instinctively, almost involuntarily. "P'raps some day, Billikins!" she said, with a little, quiver-

laugh. "But not yet—not if I've got to go to the Hills away from you."

"When I follow you to the Hills, then," he said.

She freed one hand and, reaching up, lightly stroked his cheek. "P'r'aps, Billikins!" she said again. "But—you'll have to be awfully patient with me, because—because——" She paused, agitatedly; then went yet a little nearer to him. "You will be kind to me, won't you?" she pleaded.

He put his arm about her. "Always, dear," he said.

She raised her face. She was still trembling, but her action was one of resolute confidence. "Then let's be friends, Billikins!" she said.

It was a tacit invitation. He bent and gravely kissed her.

Her lips returned his kiss shyly, quiveringly. "You're the nicest man I ever met, Billikins," she said. "Good-night!"

She slipped from his encircling arm and was gone.

The man stood motionless where she had left him, wondering at himself, at her, at the whole rocking universe. She had kindled the Magic Fire in him indeed! His whole being was aglow. And yet—and yet—she had had her way with him. He had let her go.

Wherefore? Wherefore? The hot blood dinned in his ears. His hands clenched. And from very deep within him the answer came. Because he loved her.

CHAPTER V

THE WOMAN

SUMMER in the Plains! Pitiless, burning summer!

All day a blinding blaze of sun beat upon the wooden roof, forced a way through the shaded windows, lay like a blasting spell upon the parched compound. The cluster-roses had shrivelled and died long since. Their brown leaves still clung to the veranda and rattled desolately with a dry, scaly sound in the burning wind of dawn.

The green parakeets had ceased to look for sweets on the veranda. Nothing dainty ever made its appearance there. The Englishman who came and went with such grim endurance offered them no temptations.

Sometimes he spent the night on a *charpoy* on the veranda, lying motionless though often sleepless, through the breathless, dragging hours. There had been sickness among the officers and Merryon, who was never sick, was doing the work of three men. He did it doggedly, with the stubborn determination characteristic of him; not cheerfully—no one ever accused Merryon of being cheerful—but efficiently and uncomplainingly. Other men cursed the heat, but he never took the trouble. He needed all his energies for what he had to do.

His own chance of leave had become very remote. There was so much sick leave that he could not be spared. Over that, also, he made no complaint. It

was useless to grumble at the inevitable. There was not a man in the mess who could not be spared more easily than he.

For he was indomitable, unfailing, always fulfilling his duties with machine-like regularity, stern, impenetrable, hard as granite.

As to what lay behind that hardness, no one ever troubled to enquire. They took him for granted, much as if he had been a well-oiled engine guaranteed to surmount all obstacles. How he did it was nobody's business but his own. If he suffered in that appalling heat as other men suffered, no one knew of it. If he grew a little grimmer and a little gaunter, no one noticed. Everyone knew that whatever happened to others, he at least would hold on. Everyone described him as "hard as nails."

Each day seemed more intolerable than the last, each night a perceptible narrowing of the fiery circle in which they lived. They seemed to be drawing towards a culminating horror that grew hourly more palpable, more monstrously menacing—a horror that drained their strength even from afar.

"It's going to kill us this time," declared little Robey, the youngest subaltern, to whom the nights were a torment unspeakable. He had been within an ace of heat apoplexy more than once, and his nerves were stretched almost to breaking-point.

But Merryon went doggedly on, hewing his unswerving way through all. The monsoon was drawing near, and the whole tortured earth seemed to be waiting in dumb expectation.

Night after night a glassy moon came up, shimmery and awful, through a thick haze of smoke. Night after night Merryon lay on his back, smoking his pipe in stark endurance while the dreadful hours crept by. Sometimes he held a letter in his wife hard clenched in one powerful hand. She wrote to him frequently—short, airy epistles, witty, inconsequent, often provocatively meagre.

"There is a Captain Silvester here," she wrote one day, "such a bounder. But he is literally the only one who can dance in the station. So what would you say? Poor Mrs. Paget is so shocked!"

Feathery hints of this description were by no means unusual, but though Merryon sometimes frowned at them, they did not make him uneasy. His will-o'-the-wisp might beckon, but she would never allow herself to be caught. She never spoke of love in her letters, always ending demurely, "Yours sincerely, P. Paget." But now and then there was a small cross scratched impulsively underneath the name, and the letters bore this token accompanied Merryon through the inferno whithersoever he went.

There came at last a night of terrible heat, when it seemed as if the world itself must burst into flames. A heavy storm rolled up, roared overhead for a space like a caged monster, and sullenly rolled away, without a single drop of rain to ease the awful tension, waiting that possessed all things.

Merryon left the mess early, tramping back over the dusty road, convinced that the downpour for which they all yearned was at hand. There was no more

light that night, only a hot blackness, illumined now and then by a brilliant dart of lightning that shocked the senses and left behind a void indescribable, a darkness that could be felt. There was something savage in the atmosphere, something primitive and passionate that seemed to force itself upon him even against his will. His pulses were strung to a tropical intensity that made him aware of the man's blood in him, racing at fever heat through veins that felt swollen to bursting.

He entered his bungalow and flung off his clothes, took a plunge in a bath of tepid water, from which he emerged with a pricking sensation all over him that made the lightest touch a torture, and finally, keyed up to a pitch of sensitiveness that excited his own contempt, he pulled on some pyjamas and went out to his *charpoy* on the veranda.

He dismissed the *punkah* coolie, feeling his presence to be intolerable, and threw himself down with his coat flung open. The oppression of the atmosphere was as though a red-hot lid were being forced down upon the tortured earth. The blackness beyond the veranda was like a solid wall. Sleep was out of the question. He could not smoke. It was an effort even to breathe. He could only lie in torment and wait—and wait.

The flashes of lightning had become less frequent. A kind of waking dream began to move in his brain. A figure gradually grew upon that screen of darkness—an elf-like thing, intangible, transparent, a quivering, shadowy image, remote as the dawn.

Wide-eyed, he watched the vision, his pulses tingling with a mad longing so fierce as to be beyond his own control. It was as though he drunk strong wine and had somehow slipped the reins of ordinary convention. The savagery of the tropical intensity of it, had got into him. Naked, wholly primitive, he lay and waited—waited.

For awhile the vision hung before him, tantalizing him, maddening him, eluding him. Then a flash of lightning, and it was gone.

He started up on the *chaise*, every nerve taut stretched wire.

"Come back!" he cried, hoarsely. "Come back!"

Again the lightning streaked the darkness. Then came a burst of thunder, and suddenly, through and above it, he heard the far-distant roar of a storm. He sprang to his feet. It was coming.

The seconds throbbed away. Something was coming in the compound—a subtle, awful Something. The trees and bushes quivered before it, the clusters rattled their dead leaves wildly. But the man stood motionless in the light that fell across the veranda from the open window of his room, watching with eyes that shone with a fierce and glaring intensity the return of his vision.

The fevered blood was hammering at his temples. For the moment he was scarcely sane. The fierce strain of the past few weeks that had overwhelmed the hardy men had wrought upon him in a far more subtle but none the less compelling. They

been stricken down, whereas he had been strung to a pitch where bodily suffering had almost ceased to count. He had grown used to the torment, and now in this supreme moment it tore from him his civilization, but his physical strength remained untouched. He stood alert and ready, like a beast in a cage, waiting for whatever the gods might deign to throw him.

The tumult beyond that wall of blackness grew. It became a swirling uproar. The rose-vines were whipped from the veranda and flung writhing in all directions. The trees in the compound strove like terrified creatures in the grip of a giant. The heat of the blast was like tongues of flame blown from an immense furnace. Merryon's whole body seemed to be wrapped in fire. With a fierce movement he stripped the coat from him and flung it into the room behind him. He was alone, save for the devils that raged in that pandemonium. What did it matter how he met them?

And then, with the suddenness of a stupendous weight dropped from heaven, came rain, rain in torrents and billows, rain solid as the volume of Niagara, a crushing, mighty force.

The tempest shrieked through the compound. The lightning glimmered, leapt, became continuous. The night was an inferno of thunder and violence.

And suddenly out of the inferno, out of the awful strife of elements, out of that frightful rainfall, there came—a woman!

CHAPTER VI

LOVERS

SHE came haltingly, clinging with both hands to the rail of the veranda, her white face staring upward in terror and instinctive appeal. She was like an animal dragging itself away from destruction, with drooping and battered wings.

He saw her coming and stiffened. It was his turn to return to him, but till she came within reach of him he was afraid to move. He stood upright against the wall, every mad instinct of his blood fiercely awake and clamouring.

The noise and wind increased. It swirled round the veranda. She seemed afraid to quit her hold on the balustrade lest she should be swept away. But still she drew nearer to the lighted window, and at last, with desperate resolution, she tore herself loose and sprang for shelter.

In that instant the man also sprang. He caught her in arms that almost expected to clasp empty air, arms that crushed in a savage ecstasy of possession the actual contact with a creature of flesh and blood. In the same moment the lamp in the room behind her flared up and went out.

There arose a frightened cry from his breast. For a few moments she fought like a mad thing for freedom. He felt her teeth set in his arm, and laughed aloud. Then very suddenly her struggles ceased. He became aware of a change in her. She gave

whole weight into his arms, and lay palpitating against his heart.

By the awful glare of the lightning he found her face uplifted to his. She was laughing, too, but in her eyes was such a passion of love as he had never looked upon before. In that moment he knew that she was his—wholly, completely, irrevocably his. And, stooping, he kissed the upturned lips with the fierce exultation of the conqueror.

Her arms slipped round his neck. She abandoned herself wholly to him. She gave him worship for worship, passion for passion. . . .

Later, he awoke to the fact that she was drenched from head to foot. He drew her into his room and shut the window against the driving blast. She clung to him still.

"Isn't it dreadful?" she said, shuddering. "It's just as if Something Big is trying to get between us."

He closed the shutter also, and groped for matches. She accompanied him on his search, for she would not lose touch with him for a moment.

The lamp flared on her white, childish face, showing him wild joy and horror strangely mingled. Her great eyes laughed up at him.

"Billikins, darling! You aren't very decent, are you? I'm not decent either, Billikins. I'd like to take off all my clothes and dance on my head."

He laughed grimly. "You will certainly have to undress—the sooner the better."

She spread out her hands. "But I've nothing to wear, Billikins, nothing but what I've got on. I didn't

know it was going to rain so. You'll have to lend me a suit of pyjamas, dear, while I get my things dried. You see"—she halted a little—"I came away in rather a hurry. I—was bored."

Merryon, oddly sobered by her utter dependence upon him, turned aside and foraged for brandy. She came close to him while he poured it out.

"It isn't for me, is it? I couldn't drink it, darling. I shouldn't know what was happening for the next twenty-four hours if I did."

"It doesn't matter whether you do or not," he said. "I shall be here to look after you."

She laughed at that, a little quivering laugh of sheer content. Her cheek was against his shoulder. "Live for ever, O king!" she said, and softly kissed it.

Then she caught sight of something on the arm below. "Oh, darling, did I do that?" she cried, in distress.

He put the arm about her. "It doesn't matter. I don't feel it," he said. "I've got you."

She lifted her lips to his again. "Billikins, darling, I didn't know it was you—at first, not till I heard you laugh. I'd rather die than hurt you. You know it, don't you?"

"Of course I know it," he said.

He caught her to him passionately for a moment, then slowly relaxed his hold. "Drink this, like a good child," he said, "and then you must get to bed. You are wet to the skin."

"I know I am," she said, "but I don't mind."

"I mind for you," he said.

She laughed up at him, her eyes like stars. "I was lucky to get in when I did," she said. "Wasn't the heat dreadful—and the lightning? I ran all the way from the station. I was just terrified at it all. But I kept thinking of you, dear—of you, and how—and how you'd kissed me that night when I was such a little idiot as to cry. Must I really drink it, Billikins? Ah, well, just to please you—anything to please you. But you must have one little sip first. Yes, darling, just one. That's to please your silly little wife, who wants to share everything with you now. There's my own boy! Now I'll drink every drop—every drop."

She began to drink, standing in the circle of his arm; then looked up at him with a quick grimace. "It's powerful strong, dear. You'll have to put me to bed double quick after this, or I shall be standing on my head in earnest."

He laughed a little. She leaned back against him.

"Yes, I know, darling. You're a man that likes to manage, aren't you? Well, you can manage me and all that is mine for the rest of my natural life. I'm never going to leave you again, Billikins. That's understood, is it?"

His face sobered. "What possessed you to come back to this damnable place?" he said.

She laughed against his shoulder. "Now, Billikins, don't you start asking silly questions! I'll tell you as much as it's good for you to know all in good time. I came mainly because I wanted to. And that's the reason why I'm going to stay. See?"

She reached up an audacious finger and smooched the faint frown from his forehead with her provocative smile.

"It'll have to be a joint management," she said. "There are so many things you mustn't do. Darling, I've finished the brandy to please you. Suppose you look out your prettiest suit of pyjamas and I'll try and get into them." She broke in a giddy little laugh. "What would Mrs. Paget say? Can't you see her face? I can!"

She stopped suddenly, struck dumb by a terrible blast of wind that shook the bungalow to its foundations.

"Just hark to the wind and the rain, Billikin!" she whispered, as it swirled on. "Did you ever hear anything so awful? It's as if—as if God were furious—about something. Do you think He is, do you?" She pressed close to him with a pleading face upraised. "Do you believe in Billikins? Honestly now!"

The man hesitated, holding her fast in his arms, seeing only the quivering, childish mouth and beseeching eyes.

"You don't, do you?" she said. "I don't mind Billikins. I think He's just a myth. Or anyhow He's there at all—He doesn't bother about the people who were born on the wrong side of the safety curtain. There, darling! Kiss me once more—I love your kisses—I love them! And now go! Yes—you must go—just while I make myself respectable. Yes, but you can leave the door ajar, dear heart

want to feel you close at hand. I am yours—till I die—king and master!"

Her eyes were brimming with tears; he thought her overwrought and weary, and passed them by in silence.

And so through that night of wonder, of violence and of storm, she lay against his heart, her arms wound about his neck with a closeness which even sleep could not relax.

Out of the storm she had come to him, like a driven bird seeking refuge; and through the fury of the storm he held her, compassing her with the fire of his passion.

"I am safe now," she murmured once, when he thought her sleeping. "I am quite—quite safe."

And he, fancying the raging of the storm had disturbed her, made hushing answer, "Quite safe, wife of my heart."

She trembled a little, and nestled closer to his breast.

CHAPTER VII

THE HONEYMOON

"YOU can't mean to let your wife stay here!" ejaculated the colonel, sharply. "You wouldn't do anything so mad!"

Merryon's hard mouth took a sterner downward curve. "My wife refuses to leave me, sir," he said

"Good heavens above, Merryon!" The colonel's voice held a species of irritated derision. "Do tell me you can't manage—a—a piece of thistle-like that?"

Merryon was silent, grimly, implacably. Plainly he had no intention of making such an admission.

"It's madness—criminal madness!" Colonel Davenant looked at him aggressively, obviously longing to pierce that stubborn calm with which Merryon had so long withstood the world.

But Merryon remained unmoved, though deep in his private soul he knew that the colonel was right. He knew that he had decided upon a course of action that involved a risk which he dreaded to contemplate.

"Oh, look here, Merryon!" The colonel lost his temper after his own precipitate fashion. "Don't you see such a confounded fool! Take a fortnight's leave. I can't spare you longer—and go back to the States with her! Make her settle down with my wife and Shamkura! Tell her you'll beat her if she doesn't!"

Merryon's grim face softened a little. "Thank you very much, sir! But you can't spare me even for a fortnight. Moreover, that form of punishment would only scare her. So, you see, it would come to the same thing in the end. She is determined to face what she has to face for the present."

"And you're determined to let her!" growled the colonel.

Merryon shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll probably lose her," the colonel persisted.

gnawing fiercely at his moustache. "Have you considered that?"

"I've considered everything," Merryon said, rather heavily. "But she came to me—through that inferno. I can't send her away again. She wouldn't go."

Colonel Davenant swore under his breath. "Let me talk to her!" he said, after a moment.

The ghost of a smile touched Merryon's face. "It's no good, sir. You can talk. You won't make any impression."

"But it's practically a matter of life and death, man!" insisted the colonel. "You can't afford any silly sentiment in an affair like this."

"I am not sentimental," Merryon said, and his lips twitched a little with the words. "But all the same, since she has set her heart on staying, she shall stay. I have promised that she shall."

"You are mad," the colonel declared. "Just think a minute! Think what your feelings will be if she dies!"

"I have thought, sir." The dogged note was in Merryon's voice again. His face was a mask of impenetrability. "If she dies, I shall at least have the satisfaction of knowing that I made her happy first."

It was his last word on the subject. He departed, leaving the colonel fuming.

That evening the latter called upon Mrs. Merryon. He found her sitting on her husband's knee smoking a Turkish cigarette, and though she abandoned this unconventional attitude to receive her visitor, he had

the colonel suddenly and paternally patted her cheek.

"You're a very naughty girl," he said. "But I suppose we shall have to make the best of you. Only, for Heaven's sake, don't go and get ill on the quiet! If you begin to feel queer, send for the doctor at the outset!"

He abandoned his attitude of disapproval towards Merryon after that interview, realizing possibly its injustice. He even declared in a letter to his wife that Mrs. Merryon was an engaging chit, with a will of her own that threatened to rule them all! Mrs. Davenant pursed her lips somewhat over the assertion, and remarked that Major Merryon's wife was plainly more at home with men than women. Captain Silvester was so openly out of temper over her absence that it was evident she had been "leading him on with utter heartlessness," and now, it seemed, she meant to have the whole mess at her beck and call.

As a matter of fact, Puck saw much more of the mess than she desired. It became the fashion among the younger officers to drop into the Merryons' bungalow at the end of the evening. Amusements were scarce, and Puck was a vigorous antidote to boredom. She always sparkled in society, and she was too sweet-natured to snub "the boys," as she called them. The smile of welcome was ever ready on her little, thin white face, the quick jest on her nimble tongue.

"We mustn't be piggy just because we are happy," she said to her husband once. "How are they to know we are having our honeymoon?" And then

she nestled close to him, whispering, "It's quite the best honeymoon any woman ever had."

To which he could make but the one reply, pressed her to his heart and kissing the red lips that moved so merrily when the world was looking on.

She had become the hub of his existence, and by day he watched her anxiously, grasping happiness with a feeling that it was too good to last.

The rains set in in earnest, and the reek of the Plains rose like an evil miasma to the turbid heaven. The atmosphere was as the interior of a steam cauldron. Great toadstools spread like a loathsome disease over the compound. Fever was rife in camp. Mosquitoes buzzed incessantly everywhere, and rats began to take refuge in the bungalow. Puck was privately terrified at rats, but she smothered her terror in her husband's presence and maintained a smiling front. They laid down poison for the rats who died horribly in inaccessible places, making her wonder if they were not almost preferable alive. Then one night she discovered a small snake coiled in a corner of her bedroom.

She fled to Merryon in horror, and he and *khitmutgar* slew the creature. But Puck's nerves were on edge from that day forward. She went through agonies of cold fear whenever she was left alone, and she feverishly encouraged the subalterns to visit during her husband's absence on duty.

He raised no objection till he one day returned unexpectedly to find her dancing a hornpipe for

benefit of a small, admiring crowd to whom she had been administering tea.

She sprang like a child to meet him at his entrance, declaring the entertainment at an end; and the crowd soon melted away.

Then, somewhat grimly, Merryon took his wife to task.

She sat on the arm of his chair with her arms round his neck, swinging one leg while she listened. She was very docile, punctuating his remarks with soft kisses dropped inconsequently on the top of his head. When he ended, she slipped cosily down upon his knee and promised to be good.

It was not a very serious promise, and it was plainly proffered in a spirit of propitiation. Merryon pursued the matter no further, but he was vaguely dissatisfied. He had a feeling that she regarded his objections as the outcome of eccentric prudishness, or at the best an unreasonable fit of jealousy. She smoothed him down as though he had been a spoilt child, her own attitude supremely unabashed; and though he could not be angry with her, an uneasy sense of doubt pressed upon him. Utterly his own as he knew her to be, yet dimly, intangibly, he began to wonder what her outlook on life could be, how she regarded the tie that bound them. It was impossible to reason seriously with her. She floated out of his reach at the first touch.

So that curious honeymoon of theirs continued, love and passion crudely mingled, union without knowledge, flaming worship and blind possession

"You are happy?" Merryon asked her once.

To which she made ardent answer, "Always happy in your arms, O king."

And Merryon was happy also, though, looking later, it seemed to him that he snatched his happiness on the very edge of the pit, and that even at the time he must have been half-aware of it.

When, a month after her coming, the scourge of the Plains caught her, as was inevitable, he felt as if his new-found kingdom had begun already to depart from him.

For a few days Puck was seriously ill with malady. She came through it with marvellous resolution, nursed by Merryon and his bearer, the general doctor of the establishment.

But it left her painfully weak and thin, and the colonel became again furiously insistent that she should leave the Plains till the rains were over.

Merryon, curiously enough, did not insist. One evening he took the little wasted body into his arms and begged her—actually begged her—to consent to go.

"I shall be with you for the first fortnight," he said. "It won't be more than a six-weeks' separation."

"Six weeks!" she protested, piteously.

"Perhaps less," he said. "I may be able to come to you for a day or two in the middle. Say you will go—and stay, sweetheart! Set my mind at rest!"

"But, darling, you may be ill. A thousand things may happen. And I couldn't go back to Shamk-

"I couldn't!" said Puck, almost crying, clinging fast around his neck.

"But why not?" he questioned, gently. "Weren't they kind to you there? Weren't you happy?"

She clung faster. "Happy, Billikins! With that hateful Captain Silvester lying in wait to—to make love to me! I didn't tell you before. But that—that was why I left."

He frowned above her head. "You ought to have told me before, Puck."

She trembled in his arms. "It didn't seem to matter when once I'd got away; and I knew it would only make you cross."

"How did he make love to you?" demanded Merryon.

He tried to see her face, but she hid it resolutely against him. "Don't, Billikins! It doesn't matter now."

"It does matter," he said, sternly.

Puck was silent.

Merryon continued inexorably. "I suppose it was your own fault. You led him on."

She gave a little nervous laugh against his breast. "I never meant to, Billikins. I—I don't much like men—as a rule."

"You manage to conceal that fact very successfully," he said.

She laughed again rather piteously. "You don't know me," she whispered. "I'm not—like that—all through."

"I hope not," said Merryon, severely.

She turned her face slightly upwards and snuggled it into his neck. "You used not to mind," she said.

He held her close in his arms the while he snuggled himself against her. "Well, I mind now," he said. "And I will have no more of it. Is that clearly understood?"

She assented dubiously, her lips softly kissing his neck. "It isn't—all my fault, Billikins," she murmured, wistfully, "that men treat me—lightly."

He set his teeth. "It must be your fault," he declared, firmly. "You can help it if you try."

She turned her face more fully to his. "How do you look, darling! You haven't kissed me for five minutes."

"I feel more like whipping you," he said, grimly.

She leapt in his arms as if he had been about to put his words into action. "Oh, no!" she cried. "You wouldn't beat me, Billikins. You—you wouldn't, dear, would you?" Her great eyes, dilated and pleading, gazed into his for a long desperate second, then she gave herself back to him with a sobbing laugh. "You're not in earnest, of course. I'm silly to tell you. Do kiss me, darling, and not frighten any more!"

He held her close, but still he did not comply with her request. "Did this Silvester ever kiss you?" he asked.

She shook her head vehemently, hiding her face.

"Look at me!" he said.

"No, Billikins!" she protested.

"Then tell me the truth!" he said.

"He kissed me—once, Billikins," came in distressed accents from his shoulder.

"And you?" Merryon's words sounded clipped and cold.

She shivered. "I ran right away to you. I—I didn't feel safe any more."

Merryon sat silent. Somehow he could not stir up his anger against her, albeit his inner consciousness told him that she had been to blame; but for the first time his passion was cooled. He held her without ardour, the while he wondered.

That night he awoke to the sound of her low sobbing at his side. His heart smote him. He put forth a comforting hand.

She crept into his arms. "Oh, Billikins," she whispered, "keep me with you! I'm not safe—by myself."

The man's soul stirred within him. Dimly he began to understand what his protection meant to her. It was her anchor, all she had to keep her from the whirlpools. Without it she was at the mercy of every wind that blew. Again cold doubt assailed him, but he put it forcibly away. He gathered her close, and kissed the tears from her face and the trouble from her heart

too lonely, she said; she was afraid of snakes, or rats, or bogies. She used to curl up on the *charpoy* in his room, clad in the airiest of wrappers, and doze the time away till he was ready.

One night she actually fell into a sound sleep thus, and he, finishing his work, sat on and on, watching her, loth to disturb her. There was deep pathos in her sleeping face. Lines that in her waking moments were never apparent were painfully noticeable in repose. She had the puzzled, wistful look of a child who has gone through trouble without understanding it, a hurt and piteous look.

He watched her thus till a sense of trespass came upon him, and then he rose, bent over her, and very tenderly lifted her.

She was alert on the instant, with a sharp movement of resistance. Then at once her arms went round his neck. "Oh, darling, is it you? Don't bother to carry me! You're so tired."

He smiled at the idea, and she nestled against his heart, lifting soft lips to his.

He carried her to bed, and laid her down, but she would not let him go immediately. She yet clung about his neck, hiding her face against it.

He held her closely. "Good-night, little pal—little sweetheart," he said.

Her arms tightened. "Billikins!" she said.

He waited. "What is it, dear?"

She became a little agitated. He could feel her lips moving, but they said no audible word.

He waited in silence. And suddenly she raised her

face and looked at him fully. There was a glory in her eyes such as he had never seen before.

"I dreamt last night that the wonderfulest thing happened," she said, her red lips quivering close to his own. "Billikins, what if—the dream came true?"

A hot wave of feeling went through him at her words. He crushed her to him, feeling the quick beat of her heart against his own, the throbbing surrender of her whole being to his. He kissed her burningly, with such a passion of devotion as had never before moved him.

She laughed rapturously. "Isn't it great, Billikins?" she said. "And I'd have missed it all if it hadn't been for you. Just think—if I hadn't jumped—before the safety-curtain—came—down!"

She was speaking between his kisses, and eventually they stopped her.

"Don't think!" he said. "Don't think!"

It was the beginning of a new era, the entrance of a new element into their lives. Perhaps till that night he had never looked upon her wholly in the light of wife. His blind passion for her had intoxicated him. She had been to him an elf from fairyland, a being elusive who offered him all the magic of her love, but upon whom he had no claims. But from that night his attitude towards her underwent a change. Very tenderly he took her into his own close keeping. She had become human in his eyes, no longer a wayward sprite, but a woman, eager-hearted, and his own. He gave her reverence because of that womanhood which he had only just begun to visualize in her. Out of his

passion there had kindled a greater fire. All that she had in life she gave him, glorying in the gift, and in return he gave her love.

All through the days that followed he watched over her with unflinching devotion—a devotion that drew her nearer to him than she had ever been before. She was ever responsive to his mood, keenly susceptible to his every phase of feeling. But, curiously, she took no open notice of the change in him. She was sublimely happy, and like a child she lived upon happiness, asking no questions. He never saw her other than content.

Slowly that month of deadly rain wore on. The Plains had become a vast and fetid swamp, the atmosphere a weltering, steamy heat, charged with fever, leaden with despair.

But Puck was like a singing bird in the heart of the wilderness. She lived apart in a paradise of her own, and even the colonel had to relent again and bestow his grim smile upon her.

"Merryon's a lucky devil," he said, and everyone in the mess agreed with him.

But, "You wait!" said Macfarlane, the doctor, with gloomy emphasis. "There's more to come."

It was on a night of awful darkness that he uttered this prophecy, and his hearers were in too overwhelming a state of depression to debate the matter.

Merryon's bungalow was actually the only one in the station in which happiness reigned. They were sitting together in his den, smoking a great many cigarettes, listening to the perpetual patter of the rain

interested him far more than the visitor, whom he guessed to be one of the subalterns. And so looking, he saw the smile freeze upon her face to a mask-like immobility. And very suddenly he remembered a man whom he had once seen killed on a battlefield—killed instantaneously—while laughing at some joke. The frozen mirth, the starting eyes, the awful vacancy where the soul had been—he saw them all again in the face of his wife.

"Great heavens, Puck! What is it?" he said, and sprang to his feet.

In the same instant she turned with the movement of one tearing herself free from an evil spell, and flung herself violently upon his breast. "Oh, Billikins, save me—save me!" she cried, and broke into hysterical sobbing.

His arms were about her in a second, sheltering her, sustaining her. His eyes went beyond her to the open door.

A man was standing there—a bulky, broad-featured, coarse-lipped man with keen black eyes that twinkled maliciously between thick lids, and a black beard that only served to emphasize an immensely heavy under-jaw. Merryon summed him up swiftly as a Portuguese American with more than a dash of darker blood in his composition.

He entered the room in a fashion that was almost insulting. It was evident that he was summing up Merryon also.

The latter waited for him, stiff with hostility, his arms still tightly clasping Puck's slight, cowering

A sudden awful doubt smote through Merryon. He turned to the girl sobbing at his breast.

"Puck," he said, "for Heaven's sake—what is this man to you?"

She did not answer him; perhaps she could not. Her distress was terrible to witness, utterly beyond all control.

But the new-comer was by no means disconcerted by it. He drew near with the utmost assurance.

"Allow me to deal with her!" he said, and reached out a hand to touch her.

But at that action Merryon's wrath burst into sudden flame. "Curse you, keep away!" he thundered. "Lay a finger on her at your peril!"

The other stood still, but his eyes gleamed evilly. "My good sir," he said, "you have not yet grasped the situation. It is not a pleasant one for you—for either of us; but it has got to be grasped. I do not happen to know under what circumstances you met this woman; but I do know that she was my lawful wife before the meeting took place. In whatever light you may be pleased to regard that fact, you must admit that legally she is my property, not yours!"

"Oh, no—no—no!" moaned Puck.

Merryon said nothing. He felt strangled, as if a ligature about his throat had forced all the blood to his brain and confined it there.

After a moment the bearded man continued. "You may not know it, but she is a dancer of some repute, a circumstance which she owes entirely to me. I picked her up, a mere child in the streets of London, turning

had been—a true marriage—you would have to—set me—free—now.”

“And why?” said Vulcan, with his evil smile.

She was white to the lips, but she faced him unflinching. “There is—a reason,” she said.

“In—deed!” He uttered a scoffing laugh of deadly insult. “The same reason, I presume, as that for which you married me?”

She flinched at that—flinched as if he had struck her across the face. “Oh, you brute!” she said, and shuddered back against Merryon’s supporting arm. “You wicked brute!”

It was then that Merryon wrenched himself free from that paralyzing constriction that bound him, and abruptly intervened.

“Puck,” he said, “go! Leave us! I will deal with this matter in my own way.”

She made no move to obey. Her face was hidden in her hands. But she was sobbing no longer, only sickly shuddering from head to foot.

He took her by the shoulder. “Go, child, go!” he urged.

But she shook her head. “It’s no good,” she said. “He has got—the whip-hand.”

The utter despair of her tone pierced straight to his soul. She stood as one bent beneath a crushing burden, and he knew that her face was burning behind the sheltering hands.

He still held her with a certain stubbornness of possession, though she made no further attempt to cling to him.

And then—just a week before the fire—another woman came, and told me that it was not a real marriage; that—that he had been through exactly the same form with her—and there was nothing in it.”

She stopped again at sound of a low laugh from Vulcan. “Not quite the same form, my dear,” he said. “Yours was as legal and binding as the English law could make it. I have the certificate with me to prove this. As you say, you were valuable to me then—as you will be again, and so I was careful that the contract should be complete in every particular. Now—if you have quite finished your—shall we call it confession?—I suggest that you should return to your lawful husband and leave this gentleman to console himself as soon as may be. It is growing late, and it is not my intention that you should spend another night under his protection.”

He spoke slowly, with a curious, compelling emphasis, and as if in answer to that compulsion Puck’s eyes came back to his.

“Oh, no!” she said, in a quick, frightened whisper. “No! I can’t! I can’t!”

Yet she made a movement towards him as if drawn irresistibly.

And at that movement, wholly involuntary as it was, something in Merryon’s brain seemed to burst. He saw all things a burning, intolerable red. With a strangled oath he caught her back, held her violently—a prisoner in his arms.

“By God, no!” he said. “I’ll kill you first!”

She turned in his embrace. She lifted her lips and

was even more terrible than his flow of words had been. The whole man vibrated with a wrath that possessed him in a fashion so colossal as to render him actually sublime. He mastered the situation by the sheer, indomitable might of his fury. There was no standing against him. It would have been as easy to stem a racing torrent.

Vulcan, for all his insolence, realized the fact. The man's strength in that moment was gigantic, practically limitless. There was no coping with it. Still with the snarl upon his lips he turned away.

"You will pay for this, my wife," he said. "You will pay in full. When I punish, I punish well."

He reached the door and opened it, still leering back at the limp, girlish form in Merryon's arms.

"It will not be soon over," he said. "It will take many days, many nights, that punishment—till you have left off crying for mercy, or expecting it."

He was on the threshold. His eyes suddenly shot up with a glowering hatred to Merryon's.

"And you," he said, "will have the pleasure of knowing every night when you lie down alone that she is either writhing under the lash—a frequent exercise for a while, my good sir—or finding subtle comfort in my arms; both pleasant subjects for your dreams."

He was gone. The door closed slowly, noiselessly upon his exit. There was no sound of departing feet.

But Merryon neither listened nor cared. He had

turned Puck's deathly face upwards, and was endowing it with burning, passionate kisses, drawing her to life, as it were, by the fiery intensity of his will.

CHAPTER IX

GREATER THAN DEATH

SHE came to life, weakly gasping. She opened her eyes upon him with the old, unwavering adoration in their depths. And then before his burning look sank. She hid her face against him with an inarticulate sound more anguished than any weeping.

The savagery went out of his hold. He drew her to the *charpoy* on which she had spent so many long evenings waiting for him, and made her sit down.

She did not cling to him any longer; she covered her face so that he should not see it, huddled herself together in a piteous heap, her black head bowed over her knees in an overwhelming sense of humiliation.

Yet there was in the situation something that was curiously reminiscent of that night when she had passed from the burning stage into the safety of his arms. Now, as then, she was utterly dependent upon his charity of his soul.

He turned from her and poured brandy and water into a glass. He came back and knelt beside her. "Drink it, my darling!" he said.

She made a quick gesture as of surprised protest. She did not raise her head. It was as if an invisible hand were crushing her to the earth.

"Why don't you—kill me?" she said.

He laid his hand upon her bent head. "Because you are the salt of the earth to me," he said; "because I worship you."

She caught the hand with a little sound of passionate endearment, and laid her face down in it, her hot, quivering lips against his palm. "I love you so!" she said. "I love you so!"

He pressed her face slowly upwards. But she resisted. "No, no! I can't—meet—your—eyes."

"You need not be afraid," he said. "Once and for all, Puck, believe me when I tell you that this thing shall never—can never—come between us."

She caught her breath sharply; but still she refused to look up. "Then you don't understand," she said. "You—you—can't understand that—that—I was—his—his——" Her voice failed. She caught his hand in both her own, pressing it hard over her face, writhing in mute shame before him.

"Yes, I do understand," Merryon said, and his voice was very quiet, full of a latent force that thrilled her magnetically. "I understand that when you were still a child this brute took possession of you, broke you to his will, did as he pleased with you. I understand that you were as helpless as a rabbit in the grip of a weasel. I understand that he was always an abomination and a curse to you, that when deliverance offered you seized it; and I do not forget that you

would have preferred death if I would have let you die. Do you know, Puck"—his voice had softened by imperceptible degrees: he was bending toward her so that she could feel his breath on her neck when he spoke—"when I took it upon me to save you from yourself that night, I knew—I guessed—what had happened to you? No, don't start like that! There was anything to forgive I forgave you long ago. I understood. Believe me, though I am a man, I can understand."

He stopped. His hand was all wet with her tears. "Oh, darling!" she whispered. "Oh, darling!"

"Don't cry, sweetheart!" he said. "And don't be afraid any longer! I took you from your inferno. I learnt to love you—just as you were, dear, just as you were. You tried to keep me at a distance; do you remember? And then—you found life was too strong for you. You came back and gave yourself to me. Have you ever regretted it, my darling? Tell me that!"

"Never!" she sobbed. "Never! Your love—your love—has been—the safety-curtain—always—between me and—harm."

And then very suddenly she lifted her face, her streaming eyes, and met his look.

"But there's one thing, darling," she said, "which you must know. I loved you always—always—even before that monsoon night. But I came to you then because—because—I knew that I had been recognized, and—I was afraid—I was terrified—till—till I was safe in your arms."

"Ah! But you came to me," he said.

A sudden gleam of mirth shot through her woe. "My! That was a night, Billikins!" she said. And then the clouds came back upon her, overwhelming her. "Oh, what is there to laugh at? How could I laugh?"

He lifted the glass he held and drank from it, then offered it to her. "Drink with me!" he said.

She took, not the glass, but his wrist, and drank with her eyes upon his face.

When she had finished she drew his arms about her, and lay against his shoulder with closed eyes for a space, saying no word.

At last, with a little murmuring sigh, she spoke. "What is going to happen, Billikins?"

"God knows," he said.

But there was no note of dismay in his voice. His hold was strong and steadfast.

She stirred a little. "Do you believe in God?" she asked him, for the second time.

He had not answered her before; he answered her now without hesitation. "Yes, I do."

She lifted her head to look at him. "I wonder why," she said.

He was silent for a moment; then, "Just because I can hold you in my arms," he said, "and feel that nothing else matters—or can matter again."

"You really feel that?" she said, quickly. "You really love me, dear?"

"That is love," he said, simply.

"Oh, darling!" Her breath came fast. "Then, if

they try to take me from you—you will really do it you won't be afraid?"

"Do what?" he questioned, sombrely.

"Kill me, Billikins," she answered, swiftly. "Kill me—sooner than let me go."

He bent his head. "Yes," he said. "My love strong enough for that."

"But what would you do—afterwards?" she breathed, her lips raised to his.

A momentary surprise showed in his eyes. "Afterwards?" he questioned.

"After I was gone, darling?" she said, anxiously.

A very strange smile came over Merryon's face. He pressed her to him, his eyes gazing deep into hers. He kissed her, but not passionately, rather with reverence.

"Your afterwards will be mine, dear, wherever it is," he said. "If it comes to that—if there is anything going—in that way—we go together."

The anxiety went out of her face in a second. She smiled back at him with utter confidence. "Oh, Billikins!" she said. "Oh, Billikins, that will be great."

She went back into his arms, and lay there for further space, saying no word. There was something sacred in the silence between them, something mysterious and wonderful. The drip, drip, drip of the ceaseless rain was the only sound in the stillness. They seemed to be alone together in a sanctuary that no other might enter, husband and wife, made one by the Board Imperishable, waiting together for deliverance. They were the most precious moment that either had ever known, for in them they were more

truly wedded in spirit than they had ever been before. How long the great silence lasted neither could have said. It lay like a spell for awhile, and like a spell it passed.

Merryon moved at last, moved and looked down into his wife's eyes.

They met his instantly without a hint of shrinking; they even smiled. "It must be nearly bed-time," she said. "You are not going to be busy to-night?"

"Not to-night," he said.

"Then don't let's sit up any longer, darling!" she said. "We can't either of us afford to lose our beauty sleep."

She rose with him, still with her shining eyes lifted to his, still with that brave gaiety sparkling in their depths. She gave his arm a tight little squeeze. "My, Billikins, how you've grown!" she said, admiringly. "You always were—pretty big. But to-night you're just—titanic!"

He smiled and touched her cheek, not speaking.

"You fill the world," she said.

He bent once more to kiss her. "You fill my heart," he said.

CHAPTER X

THE SACRIFICE

THEY went round the bungalow together to see to the fastenings of doors and windows. The *khitmutgar* had gone to his own quarters for the night, and they

were quite alone. The drip, drip, drip of the rain was still the only sound, save when the far cry of a prowling jackal came weirdly through the night.

"It's more gruesome than usual somehow," said Puck, still fast clinging to her husband's arm. "I'm not a bit frightened, darling, only sort of creepy at the back. But there's nobody here but you and me, is there?"

"Nobody," said Merryon.

"And will you please come and see if there are any snakes or scorpions before I begin to undress?" she said. "The very fact of looking under my bed makes my hair stand on end."

He went with her and made a thorough investigation, finding nothing.

"That's all right," she said, with a sigh of relief. "And yet, somehow, I feel as if something is waiting round the corner to pounce out on us. Is it Fate, do you think? Or just my silly fancy?"

"I think it is probably your startled nerves, dear," he said, smiling a little.

She assented with a half-suppressed shudder. "But I'm sure something will happen directly," she said. "I'm sure. I'm sure."

"Well, I shall only be in the next room if it does," he said.

He was about to leave her, but she sprang after him, clinging to his arm. "And you won't be late, will you?" she pleaded. "I can't sleep without you. Ah, what is that? What is it? What is it?"

Her voice rose almost to a shriek. A sudden loud

knocking had broken through the endless patter of the rain.

Merryon's face changed a very little. The iron-grey eyes became stony, quite expressionless. He stood a moment listening. Then, "Stay here!" he said, his voice very level and composed. "Yes, Puck, I wish it. Stay here!"

It was a distinct command, the most distinct he had ever given her. Her clinging hands slipped from his arm. She stood rigid, unprotesting, white as death.

The knocking was renewed with fevered energy as Merryon turned quietly to obey the summons. He closed the door upon his wife and went down the passage.

There was no haste in his movements as he slipped back the bolts, rather the studied deliberation of purpose of a man armed against all emergency. But the door burst inwards against him the moment he opened it, and one of his subalterns, young Harley, almost fell into his arms.

Merryon steadied him with the utmost composure. "Hullo, Harley! You, is it? What's all this noise about?"

The boy pulled himself together with an effort. He was white to the lips.

"There's cholera broken out," he said. "Forbes and Robey—both down—at their own bungalow. And they've got it at the barracks, too. Macfarlane's there. Can you come?"

"Of course—at once." Merryon pulled him forward. "Go in there and get a drink while I speak to my wife!"

He turned back to her door, but she met him on the threshold. Her eyes burned like stars in her lit pale face.

"It's all right, Billikins," she said, and swallow hard. "I heard. You've got to go to the barrack—haven't you, darling? I knew there was going to be—something. Well, you must take something to eat in your pocket. You'll want it before morning. And some brandy too. Give me your flask, darling, and I'll fill it!"

Her composure amazed him. He had expected anguished distress at the bare idea of his leaving her, but those brave, bright eyes of hers were actually smiling.

"Puck!" he said. "You—wonder!"

She made a small face at him. "Oh, you're not the only wonder in the world," she told him. "Run along and get yourself ready! My! You are going to be busy, aren't you?"

She nodded to him and ran into the drawing-room to young Harley. He heard her chatting there while he made swift preparations for departure, and he thanked Heaven that she realized so little the ghastly nature of the horror that had swept down upon them. He hoped the boy would have the sense to let her remain unenlightened. It was bad enough to have to leave her after the ordeal they had just faced together. He did not want her terrified on his account as well.

But when he joined them she was still smiling, eager only to provide for any possible want of his, not thinking of herself at all.

"I hope you will enjoy your picnic, Billikins," she said. "I'll shut the door after you, and I shall know it's properly fastened. Oh, yes, the *hit* will take care of me, Mr. Harley. He's such a brave man. He kills snakes without the smallest change of countenance. Good-night, Billikins! Take care of yourself! I suppose you'll come back some time?"

She gave him the lightest caress imaginable, shook hands affectionately with young Harley, who was looking decidedly less pinched than he had upon arrival, and stood waving an energetic hand as they went away into the dripping dark.

"You didn't tell her—anything?" Merryon asked, as they plunged down the road.

"Not more than I could help, major. But she seemed to know without." The lad spoke uncomfortably, as if against his will.

"She asked questions, then?" Merryon's voice was sharp.

"Yes, a few. She wanted to know about Forbes and Robey. Robey is awfully bad. I didn't tell her that."

"Who is looking after them?" Merryon asked.

"Only a native orderly now. The colonel and Macfarlane both had to go to the barracks. It's frightful there. About twenty cases already. Oh, damn this rain!" said Harley, bitterly.

"But couldn't they take them—Forbes, I mean, and Robey—to the hospital?" questioned Merryon.

"No. To tell you the truth, Robey is pegging out, poor old fellow. It's always the best chaps that go

first, though, Heaven knows, we may be all gone before this time to-morrow."

"Don't talk like a fool!" said Merryon, curtly.

And Harley said no more.

They pressed on through mud that was ankle-deep to the barracks.

There during all the nightmare hours that followed Merryon worked with the strength of ten. He gave no voluntary thought to his wife waiting for him in loneliness, but ever and anon those blazing eyes of hers arose before his mental vision, and he saw again that brave, sweet smile with which she had watched him go.

The morning found him haggard but indomitable, wrestling with the difficulties of establishing a camp a mile or more from the barracks out in the rain-drenched open. There had been fourteen deaths in the night, and seven men were still fighting a losing battle for their lives in the hospital. He had a native officer to help him in his task; young Harley was superintending the digging of graves, and the colonel had gone to the bungalow where the two stricken officers lay.

Dank and gruesome dawned the day, with the smell of rot in the air and the sense of death hovering over all. And there came to Merryon a sudden, overwhelming desire to go back to his bungalow beyond the fetid town and see how his wife was faring. She was the only white woman in the place, and the thought of her isolation came upon him now like a fiery torture.

It was the fiercest temptation he had ever known. Till that day his regimental duties had always been placed first with rigorous determination. Now for the first time he found himself torn by conflicting ties. The craving for news of her possessed him like a burning thirst. Yet he knew that some hours must elapse before he could honestly consider himself free to go.

He called an orderly at last, finding the suspense unendurable, and gave him a scribbled line to carry to his wife.

"Is all well, sweetheart? Send back word by bearer," he wrote, and told the man not to return without an answer.

The orderly departed, and for a while Merryon devoted himself to the matter in hand, and crushed his anxiety into the background. But at the end of an hour he was chafing in a fever of impatience. What delayed the fellow? In Heaven's name, why was he so long?

Ghastly possibilities arose in his mind, fears unspeakable that he dared not face. He forced himself to attend to business, but the suspense was becoming intolerable. He began to realize that he could not stand it much longer.

He was nearing desperation when the colonel came unexpectedly upon the scene, unshaven and haggard as he was himself, but firm as a rock in the face of adversity.

He joined Merryon, and received the latter's report, grimly taciturn. They talked together for a space of

needs and expediencies. The fell disease had got to be checked somehow. He spoke of recalling the officers on leave. There had been such a huge sick list that summer that they were reduced to less than half their normal strength.

"You're worth a good many," he said to Merryon half-grudgingly, "but you can't work miracles. Besides, you've got——" He broke off abruptly. "How's your wife?"

"That's what I don't know, sir," Peverish Merryon made answer. "I left her last night. She was well then. But since—I sent down an order over an hour ago. He's not come back."

"Confound it!" said the colonel, testily. "You better go yourself."

Merryon glanced swiftly round.

"Yes, go, go!" the colonel reiterated, irritably. "I relieve you for a spell. Go and satisfy yourself—say me! None but an infernal fool would have kept him here," he added, in a growling undertone, as Merryon lifted a hand in brief salute and started away through the sodden mists.

He went as he had never gone in his life before and as he went the mists parted before him and a blinding ray of sunshine came smiting through the gap like the sword of a destroyer. The aim rushed through his mind and out again, even as the grey mist-curtain closed once more.

He reached the bungalow. It stood like a shrouded ghost, and the drip, drip, drip of the rain on the veranda came to him like a death-knell.

A gaunt figure met him almost on the threshold, and he recognized his messenger with a sharp sense of coming disaster. The man stood mutely at the salute.

"Well? Well? Speak!" he ordered, nearly beside himself with anxiety. "Why didn't you come back with an answer?"

The man spoke with deep submission. "*Sahib*, here was no answer."

"What do you mean by that? What the— Here, let me pass!" cried Merryon, in a ferment. "There must have been—some sort of answer."

"No, *sahib*. No answer." The man spoke with inscrutable composure. "The *mem-sahib* has not come back," he said. "Let the *sahib* see for himself!"

But Merryon had already burst into the bungalow; so he resumed his patient watch on the veranda, wholly undisturbed, supremely patient.

The *khitmulgar* came forward at his master's noisy entrance. There was a trace—just the shadow of a suggestion—of anxiety on his dignified face under the snow-white turban. He presented him with a note on a salver with a few murmured words and a deep salaam.

"For the *sahib's* hands alone," he said.

Merryon snatched up the note and opened it with shaking hands.

It was very brief, pathetically so, and as he read, a great emptiness seemed to spread and spread around him in an ever-widening desolation.

"Good-bye, my Billikins!" Ah, the pitiful, childish scrawl she had made of it! "I've come to my senses.

and I've gone back to him. I'm not worthy of any sacrifice of yours, dear. And it would have been a big sacrifice. You wouldn't like being dragged through the mud, but I'm used to it. It came to me just that moment that you said 'Yes, of course,' when Mr. Harley came to call you back to duty. Duty is better than a worthless woman, my Billikins, and I was never fit to be anything more than a toy to you—a toy to play with and toss aside. And so good-bye, good-bye!"

The scrawl ended with a little cross at the bottom of the page. He looked up from it with eyes gone blind with pain and a stunned and awful sense of loss.

"When did the *mem-sahib* go?" he questioned, dully.

The *khitmutgar* bent his stately person. "The *mem-sahib* went in haste," he said, "an hour before midnight. Your servant followed her to the *dad bungalow* to protect her from *budmashes*, but she dismissed me ere she entered in. *Sahib*, I could do no more."

The man's eyes appealed for one instant, but fell the next before the dumb despair that looked out of his master's.

There fell a terrible silence—a pause, as it were, of suspended vitality, while the iron bit deeper and deeper into tissues too numbed to feel.

Then, "Fetch me a drink!" said Merryon, curtly "I must be getting back to duty."

And with soundless promptitude the man withdrew thankful to make his escape.

CHAPTER XI

THE SACRED FIRE

"WELL? Is she all right?" Almost angrily the colonel flung the question as his second-in-command came back heavy-footed through the rain. He had been through a nasty period of suspense himself during Merryon's absence.

Merryon nodded. His face was very pale and his lips seemed stiff.

"She has—gone, sir," he managed to say, after a moment.

"Gone, has she?" The colonel raised his brows in astonished interrogation. "What! Taken fright at last? Well, best thing she could do, all things considered. You ought to be very thankful."

He dismissed the subject for more pressing matters, and he never noticed the awful whiteness of Merryon's face or the deadly fixity of his look.

Macfarlane noticed both, coming up two hours later to report the death of one of the officers at the bungalow.

"For Heaven's sake, man, have some brandy!" he said, proffering a flask of his own. "You're looking pretty unhealthy. What is it? Feeling a bit off, eh?"

He held Merryon's wrist while he drank the brandy, regarding him with a troubled frown the while.

"What is the matter with you, man?" he said. "You're not frightening yourself? You wouldn't be such a fool!"

His hand closed urgently. He began to draw him away.

Merryon's eyes came back as it were out of space, and gave him a quick side-glance that was like the turn of a rapier. "I must go down to the *dark-bungalow*," he said, with decision.

Swift protest rose to the doctor's lips, but it died there. He tightened his hold instead, and went with him.

The colonel looked round sharply at their approach, looked—and swore under his breath. "Yes, all right, major, you'd better go," he said. "Good-bye!"

Merryon essayed a grim smile, but his ashen face only twisted convulsively, showing his set teeth. He hung on Macfarlane's shoulder while the first black cloud of agony possessed him and slowly passed.

Then, white and shaking, he stood up. "I'll get round to the *dark* now, before I'm any worse. Don't come with me, Macfarlane! I'll take an orderly."

"I'm coming," said Macfarlane, stoutly.

But they did not get to the *dark-bungalow*, or anywhere near it. Before they had covered twenty yards another frightful spasm of pain came upon Merryon, racking his whole being, depriving him of all his powers, wresting from him every faculty save that of suffering. He went down into a darkness that swallowed him, soul and body, blotting out all finite things, loosening his frantic clutch on life, sucking him down as it were into a frightful emptiness, where his only certainty of existence lay in the excruciating

agonies that tore and convulsed him like devils in some inferno under the earth.

Of time and place and circumstance thereafter he became as completely unconscious as though they had ceased to be, though once or twice he was aware of a merciful hand that gave him opium to deaden—or was it only to prolong?—his suffering. And aeons and eternities passed over him while he lay in the rigour of perpetual torments, not trying to escape, only writhing in futile anguish in the bitter dark of the prison-house.

Later, very much later, there came a time when the torture gradually ceased or became merged in a deathly coldness. During that stage his understanding began to come back to him like the light of a dying day. A vague and dreadful sense of loss began to oppress him, a feeling of nakedness as though the soul of him were already slipping free, passing into an appalling void, leaving an appalling void behind. He lay quite helpless and sinking, sinking—slowly, terribly sinking into an overwhelming sea of annihilation.

With all that was left of his failing strength he strove to cling to that dim light which he knew for his own individuality. The silence and the darkness broke over him in long, soundless waves; but each time he emerged again, cold, cold as death, but still aware of self, aware of existence, albeit the world he knew had dwindled to an infinitesimal smallness, as an object very far away, and floating ever farther and farther from his ken.

Vague paroxysms of pain still seized him from time to time, but they no longer affected him in the same way. The body alone agonized. The soul stood apart on the edge of that dreadful sea, shrinking afraid from the black, black depths and the cruel cold of the eternal night. He was terribly, crushingly alone.

Someone had once, twice, asked him a vital question about his belief in God. Then he had been warmly alive. He had held his wife close in his arms, and nothing else had mattered. But now—but now—he was very far from warmth and life. He was dying in loneliness. He was perishing in the outer dark, where no hand might reach and no voice console. He had believed—or thought he believed—in God. But now his faith was wearing very thin. Very soon it would crumble quite away, just as he himself was crumbling into the dreadful silence of the ages. His life—the brief passion called life—was over. Out of the dark it had come; into the dark it went. And no one to care—no one to cry farewell to him across that desolation of emptiness that was death. No one to kneel beside him and pray for light in that awful, all-encompassing dark!

Stay! Something had touched him even then. Or was it but his dying fancy? Red lips he had kissed and that had kissed him in return, eager arms that had clung and clung, eyes of burning adoration! Did they truly belong all to the past? Or were they here beside him even now—even now? Had he wandered backwards perchance into that strange, sweet heaven of love from which he had been so suddenly and

terribly cast out? Ah, how he had loved her! How he had loved her! Very faintly there began to stir within him the old fiery longing that she, and she alone, had ever waked within him. He would worship her to the last flicker of his dying soul. But the darkness was spreading, spreading, like the yawning of a great gulf at his feet. Already he was slipping over the edge. The light was fading out of his sky.

It was the last dim instinct of nature that made him reach out a groping hand, and with lips that would scarcely move to whisper, "Puck!"

He did not expect an answer. The things of earth were done with. His life was passing swiftly, swiftly, like the sands running out of a glass. He had lost her already, and the world had sunk away, away, with all warmth and light and love.

Yet out of the darkness all suddenly there came a voice, eager, passionate, persistent. "I am here, Billikins! I am here! Come back to me, darling! Come back!"

He started at that voice, started and paused, holding back as it were on the very verge of the precipice. So she was there indeed! He could hear her sobbing breath. There came to him the consciousness of her hands clasping his, and the faintest, vaguest glow went through his ice-cold body. He tried, piteously weak as he was, to bend his fingers about hers.

And then there came the warmth of her lips upon them, kissing them with a fierce passion of tenderness, drawing them close as if to breathe her own vitality into his failing pulses.

"Open your eyes to me, darling!" she besought him. "See how I love you! And see how I want your love! I can't do without it, Billikins. It's my only safeguard. What! He is dead? I say he is not—he is not! Or if he is, he shall rise again. He shall come back. See! He is looking at me! How dare you say he is dead?"

The wild anguish of her voice reached him, pierced him, rousing him as no other power on earth could have roused him. Out of that deathly inertia he drew himself, inch by inch, as out of some clinging swamp. His hand found strength to tighten upon hers. He opened his eyes, leaden-lidded as they were, and saw her face all white and drawn, gazing into his own with such an agony of love, such a consuming fire of worship, that it seemed as if his whole being were drawn by it, warmed, comforted, revived.

She hung above him, fierce in her devotion, driving back the destroyer by the sheer burning intensity of her love. "You shan't die, Billikins!" she told him passionately. "You can't die—now I am here!"

She stooped her face to his. He turned his lips instinctively to meet it, and suddenly it was as though a flame had kindled between them—hot, ardent, compelling. His dying pulses thrilled to it, his blood ran warmer.

"You—have—come—back!" he said, with slow articulation.

"My darling—my darling!" she made quivering answer. "Say I've come—in time!"

He tried to speak again, but could not. Yet the

deathly cold was giving way like ice before the sun. He could feel his heart beating where before he had felt nothing. A hand that was not Puck's came out of the void beyond her and held a spoonful of spirit to his mouth. He swallowed it with difficulty, and was conscious of a greater warmth.

"There, my own boy, my own boy!" she murmured over him. "You're coming back to me. Say you're coming back!"

His lips quivered like a child's. He forced them to answer her. "If you—will—stay," he said.

"I will never leave you again, darling," she made swift answer. "Never, never again! You shall have all that you want—all—all!"

Her arms closed about him. He felt the warmth of her body, the passionate nearness of her soul; and therewith the flame that had kindled between them leaped to a great and burning glow, encompassing them both—the Sacred Fire.

A wonderful sense of comfort came upon him. He turned to her as a man turns to only one woman in all the world, and laid his head upon her breast.

"I only want—my wife," he said.

CHAPTER XII

FREEDOM

It took him many days to climb back up that slope down which he had slipped so swiftly in those few awful hours. Very slowly, with painful effort, but

with unfailing purpose, he made his arduous way. And through it all Puck never left his side.

Alert and vigilant, very full of courage, very quick of understanding, she drew him, leaning on her, back to a life that had become strangely new to them both. They talked very little, for Merryon's strength was terribly low, and Macfarlane, still scarcely believing in the miracle that had been wrought under his eyes, forbade all but the simplest and briefest speech—a prohibition which Puck strenuously observed; for Puck, though she knew the miracle for an accomplished fact, was not taking any chances.

"Presently, darling; when you're stronger," was her invariable answer to any attempt on his part to elicit information as to the events that had immediately preceded his seizure. "There's nothing left to fret about. You're here—and I'm here. And that's all that matters."

If her lips quivered a little over the last assertion, she turned her head away that he might not see. For she was persistently cheery in his presence, full of tender humour, always undismayed.

He leaned upon her instinctively. She propped him so sturdily, with a strength so amazing and so steadfast. Sometimes she laughed softly at his weakness, as a mother might laugh at the first puny efforts of her baby to stand alone. And he knew that she loved his dependence upon her, even in a sense dreaded the time when his own strength should reassert itself, making hers weak by comparison.

But that time was coming, slowly yet very surely.

The rains were lessening at last, and the cholera-fien had been driven forth. Merryon was to go to the Hills on sick leave for several weeks. Colonel Davenant had awaked to the fact that his life was valuable one, and his admiration for Mrs. Merryon was undisguised. He did not altogether understand her behaviour, but he was discreet enough not to seek that enlightenment which only one man in the world was ever to receive.

To that man on the night before their departure came Puck, very pale and resolute, with shining, unwavering eyes. She knelt down before him with small hands tightly clasped.

"I'm going to say something dreadful, Billikin," she said.

He looked at her for a moment or two in silence. Then, "I know what you are going to say," he said.

She shook her head. "Oh, no, you don't, darling. It's something that'll make you frightfully angry."

The faintest gleam of a smile crossed Merryon's face. "With you?" he said.

She nodded, and suddenly her eyes were brimming with tears. "Yes, with me."

He put his hand on her shoulder. "I tell you, know what it is," he said, with a certain stubbornness.

She turned her cheek for a moment to caress his hand, then suddenly all her strength went from her. She sank down on the floor at his feet, huddled together in a woeful heap, just as she had been on that first night when the safety-curtain had dropped behind her.

"You'll never forgive me!" she sobbed. "But I knew—I knew—I always knew!"

"Knew what, child?" He was stooping over her. His hand, trembling still with weakness, was on her head. "But, no, don't tell me!" he said, and his voice was deeply tender. "The fellow is dead, isn't he?"

"Oh, yes, he's dead." Quivering, between piteous sobs, she answered him. "He—was dying before I reached him—that dreadful night. He just—had strength left—to curse me! And I am cursed! I am cursed!"

She flung out her arms wildly, clasping his feet.

He stooped lower over her. "Hush—hush!" he said.

She did not seem to hear. "I let you take me—I stained your honour—I wasn't a free woman. I tried to think I was; but in my heart—I always knew—I always knew! I wouldn't have your love at first—because I knew. And I came to you—that monsoon night—chiefly because—I wanted—when he came after me—as I knew he would come—to force him—to set me—free."

Through bitter sobbing the confession came; in bitter sobbing it ended.

But still Merryon's hand was on her head, still his face was bent above her, grave and sad and pitiful, the face of a strong man enduring grief.

After a little, haltingly, she spoke again. "And I wasn't coming back to you—ever. Only—someone—a *syce*—told me you had been stricken down. And

then I had to come. I couldn't leave you to die. That's all—that's all! I'm going now. And I shan't come back. I'm not—your wife. You're quite, quite free. And I'll never—bring shame on you—again."

Her straining hands tightened. She kissed the face she clasped. "I'm a wicked, wicked woman," she said. "I was born—on the wrong side—of the safety-curtain. That's no—excuse; only—to make you understand."

She would have withdrawn herself then, but his hands held her. She covered her face, kneeling between them.

"Why do you want me to understand?" he said, his voice very low.

She quivered at the question, making no attempt to answer, just weeping silently there in his hold.

He leaned towards her, albeit he was trembling with weakness. "Puck, listen!" he said. "I do understand."

She caught her breath and became quite still.

"Listen again!" he said. "What is done—is done; and nothing can alter it. But—your future is mine. You have forfeited the right to leave me."

She uncovered her face in a flash to gaze at him as one confounded.

He met the look with eyes that held her own. "I say it," he said. "You have forfeited the right. You say I am free. Am I free?"

She nodded, still with her eyes on his. "I have—no claim on you," she whispered, brokenly.

His hands tightened; he brought her nearer to him.

"And when that dream of yours comes true," he said, "what then? What then?"

Her face quivered painfully at the question. She swallowed once or twice spasmodically, like a hurt child trying not to cry.

"That's—nobody's business but mine," she said.

A very curious smile drew Merryon's mouth. "I thought I had had something to do with it," he said. "I think I am entitled to part-ownership, anyway."

She shook her head, albeit she was very close to his breast. "You're not, Billikins!" she declared, with vehemence. "You only say that—out of pity. And I don't want pity. I—I'd rather you hated me than that! Miles rather!"

His arms went round her. He uttered a queer, passionate laugh and drew her to his heart. "And what if I offer you—love?" he said. "Have you no use for that either, my wife—my wife?"

She turned and clung to him, clung fast and desperately, as a drowning person clings to a spar. "But I'm not, Billikins! I'm not!" she whispered, with her face hidden.

"You shall be," he made steadfast answer. "Before God you shall be."

"Ah, do you believe in God?" she murmured.

"I do," he said, firmly.

She gave a little sob. "Oh, Billikins, so do I. At least, I think I do; but I'm half afraid, even now, though I did try to do—the right thing. I shall only know for certain—when the dream comes true." Her face came upwards, her lips moved softly against his

neck. "Darling," she whispered, "don't you hope it'll be—a boy?"

He bent his head mutely. Somehow speech was difficult.

But Puck was not wanting speech of him just then. She turned her red lips to his. "But even if it's a girl, darling, it won't matter, for she'll be born on the right side of the safety-curtain now, thanks to your goodness—your generosity."

He stopped her sharply. "Puck! Puck!"

Their lips met. Puck was sobbing a little and smiling at the same time.

"Your love is the safety-curtain, Billikins darling," she whispered, softly. "And I'm going to thank God for it—every day of my life."

"My darling!" he said. "My wife!"

Her eyes shone up to his through tears. "Oh, do you realize," she said, "that we have risen from the dead?"

THE EXPERIMENT

CHAPTER I

ON TRIAL.

"I REALLY don't know why I accepted him. But somehow it was done before I knew. He waltzes so divinely that it intoxicates me, and then I naturally cease to be responsible for my actions."

Doris Fielding leant back luxuriously, her hands clasped behind her head.

"I can't think what he wants to marry me for," she said reflectively. "I am quite sure I don't want to marry him."

"Then, my dear child, what possessed you to accept him?" remonstrated her friend, Vera Abingdon, from behind the tea-table.

"That's just what I don't know," said Doris, a little smile twitching the corner of her mouth. "However, it doesn't signify greatly. I don't mind being engaged for a little while if he is good, but I certainly shan't go on if I don't like it. It's in the nature of an experiment, you see! And it really is necessary, for there is absolutely no other way of testing the situation."

She glanced at her friend and burst into a gay peal

of laughter. No one knew how utterly charming the girl could be till she laughed.

"Oh, don't look so shocked, please!" she begged. "I know I'm flippant, flighty, and foolish, but really I'm not a bit wicked. Ask Phil if I am! He has known me all my life."

"I do not need to ask him, Dot." Vera spoke with some gravity notwithstanding. "I have never for a moment thought you wicked. But I do sometime think you are rather heartless."

Doris opened her blue eyes wide.

"Oh, why? I am sure I am not. It really isn't my fault that I have been engaged two or three times before. Directly I begin to get pleasantly intimate with anyone he proposes, and how can I possibly know, unless I am on terms of intimacy, whether he should like to marry me or not? I am sure I don't want to be engaged to anyone for any length of time. It's as bad as being cast up on a desert island with only one wretched man to speak to. As a matter of fact, what you call heartlessness is sheer broad-mindedness on my part. I admit that I do occasionally sail near the wind. It's fun, and I like it. But I never do any harm—any real harm I mean. I always put my helm over in time. And I must protect myself somehow against fortune-hunters."

Vera was silent. This high-spirited young cousin of her husband's was often a sore anxiety to her. She had had sole charge of the girl for the past three years and had found it no light responsibility.

"Cheer up, darling!" besought Doris. "There is

not the smallest cause for a wrinkled brow. Perhaps the experiment will turn out a success this time. Who knows? And even if it doesn't, no one will be any the worse. I am sure Vivian Caryl will never break his heart for me."

But Vera Abingdon shook her head.

"I don't like you to be so wild, Dot. It makes people think lightly of you. And you know how angry Phil was last time."

Dot snapped her fingers airily and rose.

"Who cares for Phil? Besides, it really was not my fault last time, whatever anyone may say. Are you going to ask my *fiancé* down to Rivermead for Easter? Because if so, I do beg you won't tell everybody we are engaged. It is quite an informal arrangement, and perhaps, considering all the circumstances, the less said about it the better."

She stopped and kissed Vera's grave face, laughed again as though she could not help it, and flitted like a butterfly from the room.

CHAPTER II

HIS INTENTIONS

"WHERE is Doris?" asked Phil Abingdon, looking round upon the guests assembled in his drawing-room at Rivermead. "We are all waiting for her."

"I think we had better go in without her," said his wife, with her nervous smile. "She arranged to

motor down with Mrs. Lockyard and her party this afternoon. Possibly they have persuaded her to dine with them."

"She would never do that surely," said Phil, with an involuntary glance at Vivian Caryl who had just entered.

"If you are talking about my *fiancée*, I think it more than probable that she would," the latter remarked. "Mrs. Lockyard's place is just across the river, I understand. Shall I punt over and fetch Doris?"

"No, no!" broke in his hostess anxiously. "I am sure she wouldn't come if you did. Besides——"

"Oh, as to that," said Vivian Caryl, with a grim smile, "I think with all deference to your opinion, that the odds would be in my favour. However, let us dine first, if you prefer it."

Mrs. Abingdon did prefer it, and said so hastily. She seemed to have a morbid dread of a rupture between Doris Fielding and her *fiancé*, a feeling with which Caryl quite obviously had no sympathy. There was nothing very remarkable about the man save his somewhat supercilious demeanour which had caused Vera to marvel many times at Doris's choice.

They went in to dinner without further discussion. Caryl sat on Vera's left, and amazed her by his utter unconcern regarding the absentee. He seemed to be in excellent spirits, and his dry humour provoked a good deal of merriment.

She led the way back to the drawing-room as soon as possible. There was a billiard-room beyond to

which members of her party speedily betook themselves, and here most of the men joined them soon after. Neither Caryl nor Abingdon was with them, and Vera counted the minutes of their absence with a sinking heart while her guests buzzed all unheeding around her.

It was close upon ten o'clock when she saw her husband's face for a moment in the doorway. He made a rapid sign to her, and with a murmured excuse she went to him, closing the door behind her.

Caryl was standing with him, calm as ever, though she fancied that his eyes were a little wider than usual and his bearing less supercilious.

Her husband, she saw at a glance, was both angry and agitated.

"She has gone off somewhere with that boulder Brandon," he said. "They got down to tea, and went off again in the motor afterwards, Mrs. Lockyard doesn't seem to know for certain where."

"Phil!" she exclaimed in consternation, and added with her eyes on Caryl, "What is to be done? What can be done?"

Caryl made quiet reply:

"There was some talk of Wynhampton. I am going there now on your husband's motor-bicycle. If I do not find her there——"

He paused, and on the instant a girl's high peal of laughter rang through the house. The drawing-room door was flung back, and Doris herself stood on the threshold.

"Goodness!" she cried. "What a solemn con-

clave! You can't think how funny you all look! Do tell me what it is all about!"

She stood before them, the motor-veil thrown back from her dainty face, her slight figure quivering with merriment.

Vera hastened to meet her with outstretched hands.

"Oh, my dear, you can't think how anxious we have been about you."

Doris took her by the shoulders and lightly kissed her.

"Silly! Why? You know I always come up smiling. Why, Phil, you are looking positively green! Have you been anxious, too? I am indeed honoured."

She swept him a curtsy, her face all dimples and laughter.

"We've had the jolliest time," she declared. "We motored to Wynchampton and saw the last of the races. After that, we dined at a dear little place with a duckpond at the bottom of the garden. And finally we returned—it ought to have been by moonlight only there was no moon. Where is everyone? Is the billiard-room? I want some milk and soda frightfully. Vivian, you might, like the good sort you are go and get me some."

She bestowed a dazzling smile upon her *fancé* and offered him one finger by way of salutation.

Abingdon, who had been waiting to get in a word here exploded with some violence and told his young cousin in no measured terms what he thought of her conduct.

She listened with her head on one side, her eyes brimful of mischief, and finally with an airy gesture turned to Caryl.

"Don't you want to scold me, too? I am sure you do. You had better be quick or there will be nothing left to say."

Abingdon turned on his heel and walked away. He was thoroughly angry and made no attempt to hide it. His wife lingered a moment irresolute, then softly followed him. And as the door closed, Caryl looked very steadily into the girl's flushed face and spoke:

"All I have to say is this. Maurice Brandon is no fit escort for any woman who values her reputation. And I here and now forbid you most strictly, most emphatically, ever to go out with him alone again."

He paused. She was looking straight back at him with her chin in the air.

"Dear me!" she said. "Do you really? And who gave you the right to dictate to me?"

"You yourself," he answered quietly.

"Indeed! May I ask when?"

He stiffened a little, but his face did not alter.

"When you promised to be my wife," he said.

Her eyes blazed instant defiance.

"An engagement can be broken off!" she declared recklessly.

"By mutual consent," said Caryl drily.

"That is absurd," she rejoined. "You couldn't possibly hold me to it against my will."

"I am quite capable of doing so," he told her coolly "if I think it worth my while."

"Worth your while!" she exclaimed, staring at him as if she doubted his sanity.

"Even so," he said. "When I have fully satisfied myself that a heartless little flirt like you can be transformed into a virtuous and amiable wife. It may prove a difficult process, I admit, and perhaps not altogether a pleasant one. But I shall not shrink from that account."

He leant back against the mantelpiece with a gesture that plainly said that so far as he was concerned the matter was ended.

But it was not so with Doris. She stood before him for several seconds absolutely motionless, all the vivid colour gone from her face, her blue eyes blazing with speechless fury. At length, with a sudden, fierce movement, she tore the ring he had given her from her finger and held it out to him.

"Take it!" she said, her voice high-pitched and tremulous. "This is the end!"

He did not stir a muscle.

"Not yet, I think," he said.

She flashed a single glance at him in which pride and uncertainty were strangely mingled, then made a sudden swoop towards the fire. He read her intention in a second, and stooping swiftly caught her hand. The ring shot from her hold, glared in a shining curve in the firelight, and fell with a tinkling among the ashes of the fender.

Caryl did not utter a word, but his face was fixed

and grim as, still tightly gripping the hand he had caught, he knelt and groped among the half-dead embers for the ring it had wantonly flung there. When he found it he rose.

"Before you do anything of that sort again," he said, "let me advise you to stop and think. It will do you no harm, and may save trouble."

He took her left hand, paused a moment, and then deliberately fitted the ring back upon her finger. She made no resistance, for she was instinctively aware that he would brook no more from her just then. She was in fact horribly scared, though his voice was still perfectly quiet and even. Something in his touch had set her heart beating, something electric, something terrifying. She dared not meet his eyes.

He dropped her hand almost contemptuously. There was nothing lover-like about him at that moment.

"And remember," he said, "that no experiment can ever prove a success unless it is given a fair trial! You will continue to be engaged to me until I set you free. Is that understood?"

She did not answer him. She was pulling at the loose ends of her veil with restless fingers, her face downcast and very pale.

"Doris!" he said.

She glanced up at him sharply.

"I am rather tired," she said, and her voice quivered a little. "Do you mind if I say good-night?"

"Answer me first!" he said.

She shook her head.

"I forget what you asked me. It doesn't matter, does it? There's someone coming, and I don't want to be caught. Good-night!"

She whisked round with the words before he could realize her intention, and in a moment was at the door. She waved a hand to him airily as she disappeared. And Caryl was left to wonder if her somewhat precipitate departure could be regarded as a sign of defeat or merely a postponement of the struggle.

CHAPTER III

THE KNIGHT ERRANT

It was the afternoon of Easter Day, and a marvellous peace lay upon all things.

Maurice Brandon, a look of supreme boredom on his handsome face, had just sauntered down to the river bank. A belt of daffodils nodded to him from the shrubbery on the farther shore. He stood and stared at them absently while he idly smoked a cigarette.

Finally, after a long and quite unprofitable inspection, he turned aside to investigate a boat-house under the willows on Mrs. Lockyard's side of the stream. He found the door unlocked, and discovered within a somewhat dilapidated punt. This, after considerable exertion, he managed to drag forth and finally to run into the water. The craft seemed seaworthy, and he proceeded to forage for a punt-pole.

Fully equipped at length, he stepped on board and

poled himself out from the shore. Arrived at the farther bank, he calmly disembarked and tied up under the willows. He paused a few seconds to light another cigarette, then turned from the river and sauntered up the path between the high box hedges.

The garden was deserted, and he pursued his way unmolested till he came within sight of the house. Here for the first time he stopped to take deliberate stock of his surroundings. Standing in the shelter of a giant rhododendron, he saw two figures emerge and walk along the narrow gravelled terrace before the house. As he watched, they reached the further end and turned. He recognized them both. They were Caryl and his host Abingdon.

For a few moments they stood talking, then went away together round an angle of the house.

Scarcely had they disappeared before a girl's light figure appeared at an upstairs window. Doris's mischievous face peeped forth, wearing her gayest, most impudent grimace.

There was no one else in sight, and with instant decision Brandon stepped into full view, and without the faintest suggestion of concealment began to stroll up the winding path.

She heard his footsteps on the gravel, and turned her eyes upon him with a swift start of recognition.

He raised his hand in airy salute, and he heard her low murmur of laughter as she waved him a hasty sign to await her in the shrubbery from which he had just emerged.

• • • • •

"Did you actually come across the river?" said Doris. "Whatever made you do that?"

"I said I should come and fetch you, you know, if you didn't turn up," he said.

She laughed.

"Do you always keep your word?"

"To you—always," he assured her.

Her merry face coloured a little, but she met his eyes with absolute candour.

"And now that you have come what can we do? Are you going to take me on the river? It looks rather dangerous."

"It is dangerous," Brandon said coolly, "but I think I can get you over in safety if you will allow me to try. In any case, I won't let you drown."

"I shall be furious if anything happens," she told him—"if you splash me even. So beware!"

He pushed out from the bank with a laugh. It was evident that her threat did not greatly impress him.

As for Doris, she was evidently enjoying the adventure, and the risks that attended it only added to its charm. There was something about this man that fascinated her, a freedom and a daring to which her own reckless spirit could not fail to respond. He was the most interesting plaything she had had for a long time. She had no fear that he would ever make the mistake of taking her seriously.

They reached the opposite bank in safety, and he handed her ashore with considerable *empressement*.

"I have a confession to make," he said, as they walked up to the house.

"Oh, I know what it is," she returned carelessly. "Mrs. Lockyard did not expect me and has gone out."

He nodded.

"You are takin' it awfully well. One would almost think you didn't mind."

She laughed.

"I never mind anything so long as I am not bored."

"Nor do I," said Brandon. "We seem to have a good deal in common. But what puzzles me——"

He broke off. They had reached the open French window that led into Mrs. Lockyard's drawing-room. He stood aside for her to enter.

"Well?" she said, as she passed him. "What is this weighty problem?"

He followed her in.

"What puzzles me," he said, "is how a girl with your natural independence and love of freedom can endure to remain unmarried."

She opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

"My good sir, you have expressed the exact reason in words which could not have been better chosen. Independence, love of freedom, and a very strong preference for going my own way."

He laughed a little.

"Yes, but you would have all these things a thousand times multiplied if you were married. Look at all the restraints and restrictions to which girls are subjected where married women simply please themselves. Why, you are absolutely hedged round with conventions. You can scarcely go for a ride with a man of your acquaintance in broad daylight without

endangerin' your reputation. What would they say—your cousin and Mrs. Abingdon—if they knew that you were here with me now? They would hold up their hands in horror."

The girl's thoughts flashed suddenly to Caryl. How much freedom might she expect from him?

"It's all very well," she said, with a touch of petulance, "but easy-going husbands don't grow on every gooseberry-bush. I have never yet met the man who wouldn't want to arrange my life in every detail if I married him."

"Yes, you have," said Brandon.

He spoke with deliberate emphasis, and she knew that as he spoke he looked at her in a manner that there could be no mistaking. Her heart quickened a little, and she felt the colour rise in her face.

"Do you know that I am engaged to Vivian Caryl?" she said.

"Perfectly," he answered. "I also know that you have not the smallest intention of marryin' him."

She frowned, but did not contradict him.

He continued with considerable assurance:

"He is not the man to make you happy, and I think you know it. My only wonder is that you didn't realize it earlier—before you became engaged to him."

"My engagement was only an experiment," she said quickly.

"And therefore easily broken," he rejoined. "Why don't you put a stop to it?"

She hesitated.

He bent towards her.

"Do you mean to say that he is cad enough to hold you against your will?"

Still she hesitated, half-afraid to speak openly.

He leant nearer; he took her hand.

"My dear child," he said, "don't for Heaven's sake give in to such tyranny as that, and be made miserable for the rest of your life! Oh, I grant you he is the sort of fellow who would make what is called a good husband, but not the sort of husband you want. He would keep you in order, shackle you at every turn. Marry him, and it will be good-bye to liberty—even such liberty as you have now—for ever."

Her face had changed. She was very pale.

"I know all that," she said, speaking rapidly, with headlong impulse. "But don't you see how difficult it is for me? They are all on his side, and he is so horribly strong. Oh, I was a fool I know to accept him. But we were waltzing and it came so suddenly. I never stopped to think. I wish I could get away now, but I can't."

"I can tell you of a way," said Brandon.

She glanced at him.

"Oh, yes, I know. But I can't be engaged to two people at once. I couldn't face it. I detest scenes."

"There need be no scene," he said. "You have only to come to me and give me the right to defend you. I ask for nothing better. Even Caryl would scarcely have the impertinence to dispute it. As my wife you will be absolutely secure from any interference."

She was gazing at him wide-eyed.

"Do you mean a runaway marriage?" she questioned slowly.

He drew nearer still, and possessed himself of her hands.

"Yes, just that," he said. "It would take a little courage, but you have plenty of that. And the rest I would see to. It wouldn't be so very difficult, you know. Mrs. Lockyard would help us, and you would be absolutely safe with me. I haven't much to offer you, I admit. I'm as poor as a church mouse. But at least you would find me"—he smiled into her startled eyes—"a very easy-goin' husband, I assure you."

"Oh, I don't know!" Doris said. "I don't know!"

Yet still she left her hands in his and still she listened to him. That airy reference of his to his poverty affected her favourably. He would scarcely have made it, she told herself, with an unconscious effort to silence unacknowledged misgivings, if her fortune had been the sole attraction.

"Look here," he said, breaking in upon these hasty meditations, "I don't want you to do anythin' in a hurry. Take a little while to think it over! Let me know to-morrow! I am not leavin' till the evenin'! You shall do nothin', so far as I am concerned, against your will. I want you, now and always, to do exactly as you like. You believe that?"

"I quite believe you mean it at the present moment," she said with a decidedly doubtful smile.

"It will be so always," said Brandon, "whether you believe it or not."

And with considerable ceremony he raised her hands to his lips and deliberately kissed them. It seemed to Doris at that moment that even so headlong a scheme as this was not without its very material advantages. There were so many drawbacks to being betrothed

CHAPTER IV

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

WHEN Doris descended to breakfast on the following morning she found an animated party in the dining-room discussing the best means of spending the day. Abingdon himself and most of his guests were in favour of attending an aviation meeting at Wynhampton a few miles away.

Caryl was not present, but as she passed through the hall a little later, he came in at the front door.

"I was just coming to you," he remarked, pausing to flick the ash from his cigarette before closing the door. "I have been making arrangements for you to drive to Wynhampton with me."

Doris made a stiff movement that seemed almost mechanical. But the next moment she recovered her self-control. Why was she afraid of this man, she asked herself desperately? No man had ever managed to frighten her before.

"I think I should prefer to go in the motor," she said, and smiled with quivering lips. "Get Phil to drive with you! He likes the dog-cart better than I do."

"I have talked it over with him," Caryl responded gravely. "He agrees with me that this is the best arrangement."

There was to be no escape then. Once more the stronger will prevailed. Without another word she turned from him and went upstairs. She might have defied him, but she knew in her heart that he could compass his ends in spite of her. And she was afraid.

She had a moment of absolute panic as she mounted into the high cart. He handed her up, and his grasp, close and firm, seemed to her eloquent of that deadly resolution with which he mastered her.

For the first half-mile he said nothing whatever, being fully occupied with the animal he was driving—a skittish young mare impatient of restraint.

Doris on her side sat in unbroken silence, enduring the strain with a set face, dreading the moment when he should have leisure to speak.

He was evidently in no hurry to do so. Or was it possible that he found some difficulty in choosing his words?

At length he turned his head and spoke.

"I secured this interview," he said, "because there is an important point which I want to discuss with you."

"What is it?"

She nerved herself to meet his look, but her eyes fell before its steady mastery almost instantly.

"About our wedding," he said in his calm, deliberate voice. "I should like to have the day fixed."

Her heart gave a great thump of dismay.

"Do you really mean to hunt me down then and— and marry me against my will?" she said, almost panting out the words.

Caryl turned his eyes back to the mare.

"I mean to marry you—yes," he said. "I think you forget that you accepted me of your own accord."

"I was mad!" she broke in passionately.

"People in love are never wholly sane," he remarked cynically.

"I was never in love with you!" she cried. "Never, never!"

He raised his eyebrows.

"Nevertheless you will marry me," he said.

"Why?" she gasped back furiously. "Why should I marry you? You know I hate you, and you—you—surely you must hate me!"

"No," he said with extreme deliberation, "strange as it may seem, I don't."

Something in the words quelled her anger. Abruptly she abandoned the struggle and fell silent. Her face averted.

"And so," he proceeded, "we may as well decide upon the wedding-day without further argument."

"And if—if I refuse?" she murmured rather incoherently.

"You will not refuse," he said with a finality so absolute that her last hope went out like an extinguished candle.

She seized her courage with both hands and turned to him.

"You will give me a little while to think it over?"

"Why?" said Caryl.

"Because I—I can't possibly decide upon the spur of the moment," she said confusedly.

Was he going to refuse her even this small request? It almost seemed that he was.

"How long will it take you?" he asked. "Will you give me an answer to-night?"

Her heart leapt to a sudden hope called to life by his words.

"To-morrow!" she said quickly.

"I said to-night."

"Very well," she rejoined, yielding. "To-night, if you prefer it."

"Thanks. I do."

They were his last words on the subject. He seemed to think it ended there, and there was nothing more to be said.

As for Doris, she sat by his side, outwardly calm but inwardly shaken to the depths. To be thus firmly caught in the meshes of her own net was an experience so new and so terrifying that she was utterly at a loss as to how to cope with it. Yet there was a chance, one ray of hope to help her. There was Major Brandon, the man who had offered her freedom. He was to have his answer to-day. For the first time she began seriously to ponder what that answer should be.

CHAPTER V

THE WAY TO FREEDOM

So far as Doris was concerned the aviation meeting was not a success. There were some wonderful exhibitions of flying, but she was too preoccupied to pay more than a very superficial attention to what she saw.

They lunched at a great hotel overlooking the aviation ground. The place was crowded, and they experienced some difficulty in finding places. Eventually Doris found herself seated at a square table with Caryl and two others in the middle of the great room.

She was studying a *menu* as a pretext for avoiding conversation with her *fiancé*, when a man's voice murmured hurriedly in her ear:

"Will you allow me for a moment, please? The lady who has just left this table thinks she must have dropped one of her gloves under it."

Doris pushed back her chair and would have risen, but the speaker was already on his knees and laid a hasty, restraining hand upon her. It found hers and, under cover of the tablecloth, pressed a screw of paper into her fingers.

The next instant he emerged, very red in the face, but triumphant, a lady's gauntlet glove in his hand.

"Awfully obliged!" he declared. "Sorry to have disturbed you. Thought I should find it here."

He smiled, bowed, and departed, leaving Doris

amazed at his audacity. She had met this young man often at Mrs. Lockyard's house, where he was invariably referred to as "the little Fricker boy."

She threw a furtive glance at Caryl, but he had plainly noticed nothing. With an uneasy sense of shame she slipped the note into her glove.

She perused it on the earliest opportunity. It contained but one sentence:

"If you still wish for freedom, you can find it down by the river at any hour to-night."

There was no signature of any sort; none was needed. She hid the message away again, and for the rest of the afternoon she was almost feverishly gay to hide the turmoil of indecision at her heart.

She saw little of Caryl after luncheon, but he reappeared again in time to drive her back in the dog cart as they had come. She found him very quiet and preoccupied on the return journey, but his presence no longer dismayed her. It was the consciousness that a way of escape was open to her that emboldened her.

They were nearing the end of the drive, when he at length laid aside his preoccupation and spoke:

"Have you made up your mind yet?"

That query of his was the turning-point with her. Had he shown the smallest sign of relenting from his grim purpose, had he so much as couched his question in terms of kindness, he might have melted her even then; for she was impulsive ever and quick to respond to any warmth. But the coldness of his

question, the unyielding mastery of his manner, impelled her to final rebellion. In the moment that intervened between his question and her reply her decision was made.

"You shall have my answer to-night," she said.

He turned from her without a word, and a little wonder quivered through her as to the meaning of his silence. She was glad when they reached Rivermead and she could take refuge in her own room.

Here once more she read Brandon's message, read it with a thumping heart, but no thought of drawing back. It was the only way out for her.

She dressed for dinner, and then made a few hasty preparations for her flight. She made no elaborate plans for effecting it, for she anticipated no difficulty. The night would be dark, and she could rely upon her ingenuity for the rest. Failure was unthinkable.

When they rose from the table she waited for Vera and slipped a hand into her arm.

"Do make an excuse for me!" she whispered. "I have had a dreadful day, and I can't stand any more. I am going upstairs."

"My dear!" murmured back Vera, by way of protest.

Nevertheless she made the excuse almost as soon as they entered the drawing-room, and Doris fled upstairs on winged feet. At the head she met Caryl about to descend, almost collided with him. He had evidently been up to his room to fetch something.

He stood aside for her at once.

"You are not retiring yet?" he asked.

She scarcely glanced at him. She would not give herself time to be disconcerted.

"I am coming down again," she said, and ran on.

Barely a quarter of an hour after the encounter with Caryl, dressed in a long dark motoring coat and closely veiled, she slipped down the back stairs that led to the servants' quarters, stood listening against a baize door that led into the front hall, then whisked it open and fled across to open the conservatory door, noiseless as a shadow.

The conservatory was in semi-darkness. She expected to see no one, looked for no one. A moment she paused by the door that led into the garden, and in that pause she heard a slight sound. It might have been anything. It probably was a creak from one of the wicker chairs that stood in a corner. Whatever its origin, it startled her to greater haste. She fumbled at the door and pulled it open.

A gust of wind and rain blew in upon her, but she was scarcely aware of it. In another moment she had softly closed the door again and was scudding across the terrace to the steps that led towards the river path.

As she reached it a light shone out in front of her, wavered, and was gone.

"This way to freedom, lady mine!" said Brandon's voice close to her, and she heard in it the laugh he did not utter. "Mind you don't tumble in!"

His hand touched her arm, closed upon it, drew her to his side. In another instant it encircled her, but she pushed him vehemently away.

"Let us go!" she said feverishly. "Let us go!"

"Come along then!" he said gaily. "The boat is just here. You'll have to hold the lantern. Mind how you get on board!"

As he pushed out from the bank, he told her something of his arrangements.

"There's a motor waitin'—not the one Polly usually hires, but it's quife a decent little car. By the way, she has gone straight up to town from Wynchampton, said we should do our elopin' best alone. We shan't be quite alone, though, for Fricker is goin' to drive us. But he's a negligible quantity, eh? His only virtue is that he isn't afraid of drivin' in the dark."

"You will take me to Mrs. Lockyard?" said Doris quickly.

"Of course. She is at her flat, she and Mrs. Fricker. We shall be there soon after midnight, all bein' well. Confound this stream! It swirls like a mill-race."

He fell silent, and devoted all his attention to reaching the farther bank.

Doris sat with the lantern in her hands, striving desperately to control her nervous excitement. Her absence could not have been discovered yet, she was sure, but she was in a fever of anxiety notwithstanding. She would not feel safe until she was actually on the road.

The boat bumped at last against the bank, and she drew a breath of relief. The journey had seemed interminable.

Suddenly through the windy darkness there came to them the hoot of a motor-horn.

"That's all right," said Brandon cheerily. "That's Fricker, wantin' to know if all's well."

He hurried her over the wet grass, skirted the house by a side-path that ran between dripping laurels, and brought her out finally into the little front garden.

A glare of acetylene lamps met them abruptly as they emerged, dazzling them for the moment. The buzz of a motor engine also greeted them, and a smell of petrol hung in the wet air.

As her eyes accustomed themselves to the brightness, Doris made out a small closed motor car, with a masked chauffeur seated at the wheel.

"Good little Fricker!" said Brandon, slapping the chauffeur's shoulder as he passed. "So you've got your steam up! Straight ahead then, and as fast as you like! Don't get run in, that's all!"

He handed Doris into the car, followed her, and slammed the door.

The next moment they passed swiftly out on to the road, and Doris knew that the die was cast. She stood finally committed to this, the wildest, most desperate venture of her life.

CHAPTER VI

A MASTER STROKE

"HERE beginneth," laughed Brandon, sliding his arm around her as she sat tense in every nerve gazing at the rain-blurred window.

She did not heed him; it was almost as if she had

not heard. Her hands were tightly clasped upon one another, and her face was turned from him. There was no lamp inside the car, the only illumination proceeding from those without, showing them the driver huddled over the wheel, but shedding little light into the interior.

He tightened his arm about her, laying his other hand upon her clasped ones.

"By Jove, little girl, you're cold!" he said.

She was—cold as ice. She parted her fingers stiffly to free them from his grasp.

"I—I'm quite comfortable," she assured him, without turning her head. "Please don't trouble about me!"

But he was not to be thus discouraged.

"You can't be comfortable," he argued. "Why, you're shiverin'! Let me see what I can do to make things better!"

He tried to draw her to him, but she resisted almost angrily.

"Oh, do leave me alone! I'm not uncomfortable. I'm only thinking."

"Well, don't be silly!" he urged. "It's no use thinkin' at this stage. The thing is done now, and well done. We shall be man and wife by this time to-morrow. We'll go to Paris, eh, and have no end of a spree."

"Perhaps," she said, not looking at him or yielding an inch to his persuasion.

It was plain that for some reason she desired to be left in peace, and after a brief struggle with himself,

Brandon decided that he would be wise to let her have her way. He leaned back and crossed his arms in silence.

The car sped along at a pace which he found highly satisfactory. He had absolute faith in Fricker's driving and knowledge of the roads.

They had been travelling for the greater part of an hour, when Doris at length relaxed from her tense attitude and lay back in her corner, nestling into it with a long shiver.

Brandon was instantly on the alert.

"I'm sure you are cold. Here's a rug here! Lie me——"

"Oh, do please leave me alone!" she said, with sob. "I'm so horribly tired."

Beseechingly almost she laid her hand upon his arm with the words.

The touch fired him. He considered that he had been patient long enough. Abruptly he caught her to him.

"Come, I say," he said, half-laughing, half-savage earnest, "I can't have you cryin' on when almost our weddin' trip!"

He certainly did not expect the absolutely furious resistance with which she met his action. She thrust him from her with the strength of frenzy.

"How dare you?" she cried passionately. "I dare you touch me, you—you hateful cad!"

For the moment, such was his astonishment, she suffered her to escape from his hold. Then, cast into activity by her unreasoning fury, the devil in

leapt suddenly up and took possession. With a snarling laugh he gripped her by the arms, holding her by brutal force.

"You little wild cat!" he said in a voice that shook between anger and amusement. "So this is your gratitude, is it? I am to give all and receive nothing for my pains. Then let me make it quite clear to you here and now that that is not my intention. I will be kind to you, but you must be kind to me, too. The benefit is to be mutual."

It was premature. In his heart he knew it, but she had provoked him to it and there was no turning back now. He resented the provocation, that was all, and it made him the more brutally inclined towards her.

As for Doris, she fought and tore at his grasp like a mad creature; and when he mastered her, when still laughing between his teeth, he forced her face upwards and kissed it fiercely and violently, she shrieked between his kisses, shrieked and shrieked again.

The sudden grinding of the brake recalled Brandon to his senses. The fool was actually stopping the car. He relinquished his hold upon the girl to dash his hand against the window in front.

"Drive on, curse you, drive on!" he shouted through the glass. "I'll let you know if we want to stop."

But the car stopped in spite of him. The chauffeur, shining from head to foot in his oilskins, sprang to the ground. A moment and he was at the door, had wrenched it open, and was peering within.

"What are you gaping there for, you fool?" raved Brandon, his hand upon Doris, who was suddenly straining forward. "It's all right, I tell you. Go on!

"I am going on," the chauffeur responded calmly through his mask. "But I am not taking you any further, Major Brandon. So tumble out at once, you dirty, thieving hound!"

The words, the tone, the attitude, flashed such a revelation upon Doris that she cried out in amazement, and then with a revulsion of feeling so great that it deprived her of all speech she threw herself forward and clung to the masked chauffeur in an agony of tears.

Brandon was staring at him with dropped jaw.

"Who the blazes are you?" he said.

"You know me, I think," the chauffeur responded quietly. He was pressing Doris back into her seat with absolute steadiness. "We have met before. I was present at your first wedding ten years ago and—as a junior counsel—I helped to divorce you a few months after. My name is Vivian Caryl."

He freed a hand to push up his mask. His pale face with its heavy-lidded eyes stared, supremely contemptuous, into Brandon's suffused countenance. His composure was somehow disconcerting.

"Suppose you get out," he suggested. "I can talk to you then in a language you will understand."

"Curse you!" bawled Brandon. "Where's Fricker?" Caryl shrugged his shoulders.

"You have seen him since I have? Are you going to get out? Ah, I thought you would."

He stood aside to allow him to do so, and then stepped back to shut the door. He did not utter a word to the girl cowering within, but that action of his was a mute command. She crouched in the dark and listened, but she did not dare to follow or to flee.

CHAPTER VII

THE MAN AT THE WHEEL

WHEN Caryl came back to the motor his handkerchief was bound about the knuckles of his right hand, and his face wore a faint smile that had in it more of grimness than humour.

He paused at the open window and looked in on Doris without opening the door. The sound of the rain pattering heavily upon his shoulders filled in a silence that she found terrible. He spoke at length:

"You had better shut the window, the rain is coming in."

That was all, spoken in his customary drawl without a hint of anger or reproach. They cut her hard, those few words of his. It was as if he deemed her unworthy even of his contempt.

She raised her white face.

"What—are you going to do?" she managed to ask through her quivering lips.

"I am going to take you to the nearest town—to Bramfield to spend the rest of the night. It is getting late, you know—past midnight already."

"Brainfield!" she echoed with a start. "Then—then we have been going north all this time?"

"We have been going north," he said.

She glanced around. Her eyes were hunted.

"No," said Caryl. "I haven't killed him. He is sitting under the hedge about fifty yards up the road, thinking things over."

He opened the door then abruptly, and she held her breath and became still and tense with apprehension. But he only pulled up the window, closed the door again with a sharp click, and left her. When she dared to breathe again the car was in motion.

She took no interest in her surroundings. Her destination had become a matter of such secondary importance that she gave it no consideration whatever. What mattered, all that mattered, was that she was now in the hands and absolutely at the mercy of the man whom she feared as she feared no one else on earth, the man with whom in her mad coquetry she had dared to trifle.

The car was stopping. It came to a standstill almost imperceptibly, and Caryl stepped into the road. Tensely she watched him; but he did not so much as glance her way. He turned aside to a little gate in a high hedge of laurel, and passed within leaving her alone in the night.

Soon she heard his deliberate footfalls returning. In a moment he had reached the door, his hand was upon it. She turned stiffly towards him as it opened.

He spoke at once in his calm, unmoved voice:

"A very old friend of mine lives here. She will

put you up for the night and see to your comfort. Will you get out?"

Mutely she did so, feeling curiously weak and unstrung. He put his arm around her, and led her into the dim cottage garden.

They went up a tiled path to an open door from which the light of a single candle gleamed fitfully in the draught. She stumbled at the doorstep, but he held her up. He was almost carrying her.

As they entered, an old woman, bent and indescribably wrinkled, rose from her knees before a deep, old-fashioned fireplace on the other side of the little kitchen, and came to meet them. She had evidently just coaxed a dying fire back to life.

"Ah, poor dear!" she said at sight of the girl's exhausted face. "She looks more dead than alive. Bring her to the fire, Master Vivian! I'll soon have some hot milk for the poor lamb."

Caryl led her to an arm-chair that stood on one side of the blaze, and made her sit down. Then, stooping, he took one of her nerveless hands and held it closely in his own.

He did not speak to her, and she was relieved by his forbearance. As the warmth of his grasp gradually communicated itself to her numbed fingers, she felt her racing pulses grow steadier; but she was glad when he laid her hand down quietly in her lap and turned away.

He bent over her again in a few minutes with a cup of steaming milk. She took it from him, tasted it, and shuddered.

"There is brandy in it."

"Yes," said Caryl.

She turned her head away.

"I don't want it. I hate brandy."

He put his hand on her shoulder.

"You had better drink it all the same," he said.

She glanced at him, caught her breath sharply, then dumbly gave way. He kept his hand upon her while she drank, and only removed it to take the empty cup.

After that, standing gravely before her, he spoke again.

"I am going on into the town now with the car, and I shall put up there. My old nurse will take care of you. I shall come back in the morning."

CHAPTER VIII

THE SURRENDER OF THE CITADEL

OLD Mrs. Maynard, sweeping her brick floor with wide open door through which the April sunlight streamed gloriously, nodded to herself a good many times over the doings of the night. A very discrete creature was Mrs. Maynard, faithful to the very heart of her, but she would not have been mortal had she not been intensely curious to know what were the circumstances that had led Vivian Caryl to bring her door that shrinking, exhausted girl who still lay sleeping in the room above.

When Doris awoke in response to her deferent knock, only the reticence of the trained servant greet

her. The motherliness of the night before had completely vanished.

Doris was glad of it. She had to steel herself for the coming interview with Caryl; she had to face the result of her headlong actions with as firm a front as she could assume. She needed all her strength, and she could not have borne sympathy just then.

She thanked Mrs. Maynard for her attentions and saw her withdraw with relief. Then, having nibbled very half-heartedly at the breakfast provided, she arose with a great sigh, and began to prepare for whatever might lie before her.

Dressed at length, she sat down by the open window to wait—and wonder.

The click of the garden gate fell suddenly across her meditations, and she drew back sharply out of sight. He was entering.

She heard his leisurely footfall on the tiles and then his quiet voice below. Her heart began to thump with thick, uncertain beats. She was horribly afraid.

Yet when she heard the old woman ascending the stairs, she had the courage to go to the door and open it.

Mr. Caryl was in the parlour, she was told. He would be glad to see her at her convenience.

"I will go to him," she said, and forthwith descended to meet her fate.

He stood by the window when she entered, but wheeled round at once with his back to the light. She felt that this did not make much difference. She knew exactly how he was looking—cold, self-con-

tained, implacable as granite. She had seldom seen him look otherwise. His face was a perpetual mask to her. It was this very inscrutability of his that had first waked in her the desire to see him among her retinue of slaves.

She went forward slowly, striving to attain at least a semblance of composure. At first it seemed that he would wait for her where he was; then unexpectedly he moved to meet her. He took her hand into his own, and she shrank a little involuntarily. His touch unnerved her.

"You have slept?" he asked. "You are better?"

Something in his tone made her glance upwards, catching her breath. But she decided instantly that she had been mistaken. He would not, he could not, mean to be kind at such a moment.

She made answer with an assumption of pride. She dared not let herself be natural just then.

"I am quite well. There was nothing wrong with me last night. I was only tired."

He suffered her hand to slip from his.

"I wonder what you think of doing," he said quietly. "Have you made any plans?"

The hot blood rushed to her face before she was aware of it. She turned it sharply aside.

"Am I to have a voice in the matter?" she said, her voice very low. "You did not think it worth while to consult me last night."

"You were scarcely in a fit state to be consulted," he answered gravely. "That is why I postponed the discussion. But I was then—as I am now—entirely

at your disposal. I will take you back to your people at once if you wish it."

She made a quick, passionate gesture of protest, and moved away from him.

"Have you any alternative in your mind?" he asked.

She remained with her back to him.

"I shall go away," she said, a sudden note of recklessness in her voice. "I shall travel."

"Alone?" he questioned.

"Yes, alone." This time her voice rang defiance. She wheeled round quivering from head to foot. "But for you," she said, "but for your unwarrantable interference I should never have been placed in this hateful, this impossible, position. I should have been with my friends in London. It would have been my wedding day."

The attack was plainly unexpected. Even Caryl was taken by surprise. But the next moment he was ready for her.

"Then by all means," he said, "let me take you to your friends in London! Doubtless your chivalrous lover has found his way thither long ere this."

She stamped like a little fury.

"Do you think I would marry him now? Do you think I would marry anyone after—after what happened last night? Oh, I hate you—I hate you all!"

Her voice broke. She covered her face with tempestuous sobbing, and sank into a chair.

Caryl stood silent, biting his lip as if in irresolution. He did not try to comfort her.

After a while, her weeping still continuing, he leant across the table.

"Doris," he said, "leave off crying and listen to me! I know it is out of the question for you to marry that scoundrel whom I had the pleasure of thrashing last night. It always has been out of the question. That is one reason why I have been keeping such a hold upon you. Now that you admit the impossibility of it, I set you free. But you will be wise to think well before you accept your freedom from me. You are in an intolerable position, and I am quite powerless to help you unless you place yourself unreservedly in my hands and give me the right to protect you. It means a good deal, I know. It means, Doris, the sacrifice of your independence. But it also means a safe haven, peace, comfort, if not happiness. You may not love me. I never seriously thought that you did. But if you will give me your trust—I shall try to be satisfied with that."

Love! She had never heard the word on his lips before. It sent a curious thrill through her to hear it then. She had listened to him with her face hidden, though her tears had ceased. But as he ended, she slowly raised her head and looked at him.

"Are you asking me to marry you?" she said.

"I am," said Caryl.

She lowered her eyes from his, and began to trace a design on the tablecloth with one finger.

"I don't want to marry you," she said at length.

"I know," said Caryl.

She did not look up.

"No, you don't know. That's just it. You think you know everything. But you don't. For instance, you think you know why I ran away with Major Brandon. But you don't. You never will know—unless I tell you, probably not even then."

She broke off with an abrupt sigh, and leant back in her chair.

"One thing I do thank you for," she said irrelevantly. "And that is that you didn't take me back to Rivermead last night. Have they, I wonder, any idea where I am?"

"I left a message for your cousin before I left," Caryl said.

"Oh, then he knew——?"

"He knew that I had you under my protection," Caryl told her grimly. "I did not go into details. It was unnecessary. Only Fricker knew the details. He marked him down in the afternoon, after the incident at luncheon."

She opened her eyes.

"Then you guessed——?"

"I knew he did not find the missing glove under the table," said Caryl quietly. "I did not need any further evidence than that. I knew, moreover, that you had not devoted the whole of the previous afternoon to your correspondence. I was waiting for your cousin in the conservatory when you joined Brandon in the garden."

She coloured again vividly.

"And you—you were in the conservatory last night

when I went through. I—I felt there was someone there."

"Yes," he answered. "I waited to see you go."

"Why didn't you stop me?"

For an instant her eyes challenged his.

He stood up, straightening himself slowly.

"It would not have answered my purpose," he told her steadily.

She stood up also, her face gone suddenly white.

"You chose this means of—of forcing me to marry you?"

"I chose this means—the only means to my hand—of opening your eyes," he said. "It has not perhaps been over successful. You are still blind to much that you ought to see. But you will understand these things better presently."

"Presently?" she faltered.

"When you are my wife," he said.

She flashed him a swift glance.

"I am to marry you then?"

He held out his hand to her across the table.

"Will you marry me, Doris?"

She hesitated for a single instant, her eyes down cast. Then suddenly, without speaking, she put her hand into his, glad that, notwithstanding the overwhelming strength of his position, he had allowed her the honours of war.

CHAPTER IX

THE WILLING CAPTIVE

‘AND so you were obliged to marry your *bête noir* after all! My dear, it has been the talk of the town. Come, sit down, and tell me all about it! I am burning to hear how it came about.”

Doris's old friend, Mrs. Lockyard, paused to flick the ash from her cigarette, and to laugh slyly at the girl's face of discomfiture.

Doris also held a cigarette between her fingers, but she was only toying with it restlessly.

“There isn't much to tell,” she said. “We were married by special licence. I was not obliged to marry him. I chose to do so.”

Mrs. Lockyard laughed again, not very pleasantly.

“And left poor Maurice in the lurch. That was rather cruel of you after all his chivalrous efforts to deliver you from bondage. And he so hard up, too!”

A flush of anger rose in the girl's face. She tilted her chin with the old proud gesture.

“I should not have married him in any case,” she said. “He made that quite impossible by his own act. He was not so chivalrous as I thought.”

A gleam of malice shone for a moment in Mrs. Lockyard's eyes, and just a hint of it was perceptible in her voice as she made response.

“One has to make allowances sometimes. All men are not made after the pattern of your chosen lord and master. He, I grant you, is hard as granite and about

as impassive. Still I mustn't depreciate your prize since it was of your own choosing. Let me wish you instead every happiness!"

"He was not impassive that night," said Doris quickly, with a sharp inward sense of injustice.

"No?" questioned Mrs. Lockyard.

"No. At least—Major Brandon did not find him so." Doris' blue eyes took fire at the recollection. "He gave him his deserts," she said, with a certain exultation. "He thrashed him."

"Oh, my dear, he would have done that in any case. That was an old, old score paid off at last. Forgive me for depriving you of this small gratification! But that debt was contracted many years ago when you were scarcely out of your cradle. Your presence was a mere incident. You were the opportunity, not the cause."

"I don't know what you mean," said Doris, looking her straight in the face.

"No? Well, my dear, it isn't my business to enlighten you. If you really want to know, I must refer you to your husband. Surely that is Mrs. Fricker over there! You will not mind if he joins us?"

"I am going!" Doris announced abruptly. "I really only looked in to see if there were any letters."

She dropped her cigarette with determination and turned to the nearest door.

It was true that she had run into the club for her correspondence, but having met Mrs. Lockyard she had been almost compelled to linger, albeit unwillingly. Now from the depths of her soul she

regretted the impulse that had borne her thither. She vowed to herself that she would not enter the club again as long as Mrs. Lockyard remained in town.

Three weeks had elapsed since her marriage, three weeks of shopping in Paris, with Caryl somewhere in the background, looking on but never advising.

He had been very kind on the whole, she was fain to admit, but she was further from understanding him now than she had ever been. He had retired into his shell so completely that it seemed unlikely that he would ever again emerge, and she did not dare to make the first advance.

Her return to London had been one of the greatest ordeals she had ever faced, but she had endured it unflinchingly, and had found that London had already almost forgotten the eccentricity of her marriage. In the height of the season memories are short.

Caryl had taken a flat overlooking the river, and here they had settled down. He spent the greater part of his day at the Law Courts, and Doris found herself thrown a good deal upon her own resources. In happier days this had been her ideal, but for some reason it did not now content her.

Returning from her encounter with Mrs. Lockyard at the club, she told herself with sudden petulance that life in town had lost all charm for her.

Entering the dainty sitting-room that looked on to the river, she dropped into a chair by the window and stared out with her chin in her hands. The river was a blaze of gold. A line of long black barges was

drifting down-stream in the wake of a noisy steam tug. She watched them absently, sick at heart.

Gradually the shining water grew blurred and dim. Its beauty wholly passed her by, or if she saw it, it was only in vivid contrast to the darkness in her soul. For a little, wide-eyed, she resisted the impulse that tugged at her heart-strings; but at last in sheer weariness she gave in. What did it matter, a tear more or less? There was no one to know or care. And tears were sometimes a relief. She bowed her head upon the sill and wept.

"Why, Doris!" a quiet voice said.

She started, started violently, and sprang up right.

Caryl was standing slightly behind her, his hand on the back of her chair, but as she rose he came forward and stood beside her.

"What is it?" he said. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not!" she declared vehemently. "I wasn't. You—you startled me—that's all."

She turned her back on him and hastily dabbed her eyes. She was furious with him for coming upon her thus.

He stood at the window, looking out upon the lot of black barges in silence.

After a few seconds of desperate effort she controlled herself and turned round.

"I never heard you come in. I—must have been asleep."

He did not look at her, or attempt to refute her statement.

"I thought you were going to be out this afternoon," he said.

"So I was. So I have been. I went to the club to get my letters."

"Didn't you find anyone there to talk to?" he asked.

"No one," she answered somewhat hastily; then, moved by some impulse she could not have explained, "That is, no one that counts. I saw Mrs. Lockyard."

"Doesn't she count?" asked Caryl, still with his eyes on the river.

"I hate the woman!" Doris declared passionately. He turned slowly round.

"What has she been saying to you?"

"Nothing."

Again he made no comment on the obvious lie.

"Look here!" he said. "Can't we go out somewhere to-night? There is a new play at the Regency. They say it's good. Shall we go?"

The suggestion was quite unexpected; she looked at him in surprise.

"I have promised Vera to dine there," she said.

"Ring her up and say you can't!" said Caryl.

She hesitated.

"I must make some excuse if I do. What shall I say?"

"Say I want you," he said, and suddenly that rare smile of his for which she had wholly ceased to look flashed across his face, "and tell the truth for once!"

She did not see him again till she entered the din-

ing-room an hour later. He was waiting for her there, and as she came in he presented her with a spray of lilies.

Again in astonishment she looked up at him.

"Don't you like them?" he said.

"Of course I do. But—but——"

Her answer tailed off in confusion. Her lip quivered uncontrollably, and she turned quickly away.

Caryl was plainly unaware of anything unusual in her demeanour. He talked throughout dinner in his calm, effortless drawl, and gradually under its soothing influence she recovered herself.

She enjoyed the play that followed. It was a simple romance, well staged, and superbly acted. She breathed a sigh of regret when it was over.

Driving home again with Caryl, she thanked him impulsively for taking her.

"You weren't bored?" he asked.

"Of course not," she said.

She would have said more, but something restrained her. A sudden shyness descended upon her that lasted till they reached the flat.

She left Caryl at the outer door and turned into the room overlooking the river. The window was open as she had left it, and the air blew in sweetly upon her over the water. She had dropped her wrap from her shoulders, and she shivered a little as she stood, but a feeling of suspense kept her motionless.

Caryl had entered the room behind her. She wondered if he would pause at the table where a tray of

freshments was standing. He did not, and her nerves tingled and quivered as he passed it by.

He joined her at the window, and they stood together for several seconds looking out upon the great river with its myriad lights.

She had not the faintest idea as to what was passing in his mind, but her heart-beats quickened in his presence to such a tumult that at last she could bear it no longer. She turned back into the room.

He followed her instantly, and she fancied that he sighed.

"Won't you have anything before you go?" he said.

She shook her head.

"Good-night!" she said almost inaudibly.

For a moment—no longer—her hand lay in his. She did not look at him. There was something in his touch that thrilled through her like an electric current.

But his grave "Good-night!" had in it nothing startling, and by the time she reached her own room she had begun to ask herself what cause there had been for her agitation. She was sure he must have thought her very strange, very abrupt, even ungracious.

And at that her heart smote her, for he had been kinder that evening than ever before. The fragrance of the lilies at her breast reminded her how kind.

She bent her head to them, and suddenly, as though the flowers exhaled some potent charm, impulse—blind, domineering impulse—took possession of her.

She turned swiftly to the door, and in a moment her feet were bearing her, almost without her voluntary effort, back to the room she had left.

The door was unlatched. She pushed it open, entering impetuously. And she came upon Caryl suddenly—as he had come upon her that afternoon—sunk in a chair by the window, with his head in his hands.

He rose instantly at her entrance, rose and closed the window; then lowered the blind very quietly, very slowly, and finally turned round to her.

"What is it? You have forgotten something?"

Except that he was paler than usual, his face bore no trace of emotion. He looked at her with his heavy eyes gravely, with unfailing patience.

For an instant she stood irresolute, afraid; then again that urging impulse drove her forward. She moved close to him.

"I only came back to say—I only wanted to tell you—Vivian, I—I was horrid to you this afternoon. Forgive me!"

She stretched out her trembling hands to him, and he took them, held them fast, then sharply let them go.

"My dear," he said, "you were in trouble, and I intruded upon you. It was no case for forgiveness."

But she would not accept his indulgence.

"I was horrid," she protested, with a catch in her voice. "Why are you so patient with me? You never used to be."

He did not answer her. He seemed to regard the question as superfluous.

She drew a little nearer. Her fingers fastened quivering upon his coat.

"Don't be too kind to me, Vivian!" she said, her voice trembling. "It—it isn't good for me."

He took her by the wrists and drew her hands away.

"You want to tell me something," he said. "What is it?"

She glanced upwards, meeting his look with sudden resolution.

"You asked me this afternoon why I was crying," she said. "And I—I lied to you. You asked me, too, what Mrs. Lockyard said to me. And I lied again. I will tell you now, if—if you will listen to me."

Caryl was still holding her wrists. There was a hint of sternness in his attitude.

"Well?" he said quietly. "What did she say?"

"She said"—Doris spoke with an effort—"she said, or rather she hinted, that there was an old grudge between you and Major Brandon, a matter with which I was in no way concerned, an affair of many years' standing. She said that was why you followed him up and—thrashed him that night. She implied that I didn't count at all. She made me wonder if—if—" she was speaking almost inarticulately, with bent head—"if perhaps it was only to satisfy this ancient grudge that you married me."

Her words went into silence. She could not look him in the face. If he had not held her wrists so firmly she would have been tempted to turn and flee.

As it was, she could only stand before him in quivering suspense.

He moved at length, moved suddenly and disconcertingly, freeing one hand to turn her face quietly upwards. She did not resist him, but she shrank as she met his eyes. She fancied she had never seen him look so grim.

"And that was why you were crying?" he asked, deliberately searching her reluctant eyes.

"That was—one reason," she acknowledged faintly.

"Then there was something more than that?"

"Yes." She laid her hand pleadingly on his arm and he released her. "I will tell you," she said tremulously, keeping her face upturned to his. "At least I will try. But it's very difficult because——"

She began to falter under his look.

"Because," he said slowly, "you have no confidence in me. That I can well understand. You marry me more or less under compulsion, and when wife is no more than a guest in her husband's house confidence between them, of any description, is almost an impossibility."

He spoke without anger, but with a sadness that pierced her to the heart; and having so spoken he leant his arm upon the mantelpiece, turning slightly from her.

"I will tell you," he said, his voice very quiet and even, "exactly what Mrs. Lockyard was hinting. Ten years ago I was engaged to a girl—like you many ways—gay, impulsive, bewitching. I was young in those days—romantic, too. I worshipped her as

address. I was utterly blind to her failings. They simply didn't exist for me. She rewarded me by running away with Maurice Brandon. I knew he was a blackguard, but how much of a blackguard I did not realize till later. However, I didn't trust him even then, and I followed them and insisted that they should be married in my presence. Six months later I heard from her. He had treated her abominably, and finally deserted her, and she was trying to get a divorce. I did my best to help her, and eventually she obtained it." He paused a moment, then went on with bent head, "I never saw her after she gained her freedom. She went to her people, and very soon after—she died."

Again he paused, then slowly straightened himself. "I never cared for any woman after that," he said, "until I met you. As for Brandon, he kept out of my way, and I had no object in seeking him. In fact, I took no interest in his doings till I found that you were in Mrs. Lockyard's set. That, I admit, was something of a shock. And then—when I found that you liked the man——"

"Oh, don't!" she broke in. "Don't! I was mad ever to tolerate him. Let me forget it! Please let me forget it!"

She spoke passionately, and as if her emotion drew him he turned fully round to her.

"If you could have forgotten him sooner," he said with a touch of sternness, "you would not find yourself tied now to a man you never loved."

The effect of his words was utterly unexpected. She

started as one stricken, wounded in a vital place, and clasped her hands tightly against her breast, crushing the flowers that drooped there.

"It is a lie!" she cried wildly. "It is a lie!"

"What is a lie?"

He took a step towards her, for she was swaying as she stood; but she flung out her hands, keeping him from her.

Her face was working convulsively. She turned and moved unsteadily away from him, groping out before her as she went. So groping, she reached the door and blindly sought the handle. But before she found it he spoke in a tone that had subtly altered:

"Doris!"

Her hands fell. She stood suddenly still, listening.

"Come here!" he said.

He crossed the room and reached her.

"Look at me!" he said.

She refused for a little, trembling all over. Then suddenly, as she waited, she threw back her head and met his eyes. She was sobbing like a child that had been hurt.

He bent towards her, looking closely, closely in her quivering face.

"So," he said, "it was a lie, was it? But, my girl, how was I to know? Why on earth didn't you say so before?"

She broke into a laugh that had in it the sound of tears.

"How could I? You never asked. How could

"Shall I ask you now?" he said.

She stretched up her arms and clasped his neck.

"No," she whispered back. "Take me—take everything—for granted! It's the only way, if you want to turn a heartless little flirt like me into—a virtuous and amiable wife!"

And so, clinging to him, her lips met his in the first kiss that had ever passed between them

THOSE WHO WAIT

A FAINT draught from the hills found its way through the wide-flung door as the sun went down. It fluttered the papers on the table, and stirred a cartoon upon the wall with a dry rustling as of wind in corn.

The man who sat at the table turned his face as it were mechanically towards that blessed breath from the snows. His chin was propped on his hand. He seemed to be waiting.

The light failed very quickly, and he presently reached out and drew a reading-lamp towards him. The flame he kindled flickered upward, throwing weird shadows upon his lean, brown face, making the sunken hollows of his eyes look cavernous.

He turned the light away so that it streamed upon the open doorway. Then he resumed his former position of sphinx-like waiting, his chin upon his hand.

Half an hour passed. The day was dead. Beyond the radius of the lamp there hung a pall of thick darkness—a fearful, clinging darkness that seemed to wrap the whole earth. The heat was intense, unstirred by any breeze. Only now and then the cartoon on the wall moved as if at the touch of ghostly fingers, and each time there came that mocking whisper that was like wind in corn.

At length there sounded through the night the dull

hobbling of a horse's feet, and the man who sat waiting raised his head. A gleam of expectancy shone in his sombre eyes. Some of the rigidity went out of his attitude.

Nearer came the hoofs and nearer yet, and with them, mingling rhythmically, a tenor voice that sang.

As it reached him, the man at the table pulled out the drawer with a sharp jerk. His hand sought something within it, but his eyes never left the curtain of darkness that the open doorway framed.

Slowly, very slowly at last, he withdrew his hand empty; but he only partially closed the drawer.

The voice without was nearer now, was close at hand. The horse's hoofs had ceased to sound. There came the ring of spurred heels without, a man's hand tapped upon the doorpost, a man's figure showed suddenly against the darkness.

"Hullo, Conyers! Still in the land of the living? Ye gods, what a fiendish night! Many thanks for the beacon! It's kept me straight for more than half the way."

He entered carelessly, the lamp-light full upon him—a handsome, straight-limbed young Hercules—crossed down his riding-whip, and looked round for a drink.

"Here you are!" said Conyers, turning the rays of the lamp full upon some glasses on the table.

"Ah, good! I'm as dry as a smoked herring. You must drink too, though. Yes, I insist. I have a toast to propose, so be sociable for once. What have you got in that drawer?"

Conyers locked the drawer abruptly, and jerked out the key.

"What do you want to know for?"

His visitor grinned boyishly.

"Don't be bashful, old chap! I always guessed you kept her there. We'll drink her health, too, in a minute. But first of all"—he was splashing soda-water impetuously out of a syphon as he spoke—"first of all—quite ready, I say? It's a grand occasion—here's to the best of good fellows, that genius, that inventor of guns, John Conyers! Old chap, your fortune's made. Here's to it! Hip—hip—hooray!"

His shout was like the blare of a bull. Conyers rose, crossed to the door, and closed it.

Returning, he halted by his visitor's side, and shook him by the shoulder.

"Stop rotting, Palliser!" he said rather shortly.

Young Palliser wheeled with a gigantic laugh, and seized him by the arms.

"You old fool, Jack! Can't you see I'm in earnest? Drink, man, drink, and I'll tell you all about it. That gun of yours is going to be an enormous success—stupendous—greater even than I hoped. It's true, by the powers! Don't look so dazed! All comes to those who wait, don't you know. I always told you so."

"To be sure, so you did." The man's words came jerkily. They had an odd, detached sound, almost as though he were speaking in his sleep. He turned away from Palliser, and took up his untouched glass.

But the next instant it slipped through his finger

and crashed upon the table edge. The spilt liquid streamed across the floor.

Palliser stared for an instant, then thrust forward his own glass.

"Steady does it, old boy! Try both hands for a change! It's this infernal heat."

He turned with the words, and picked up a paper from the table, frowning over it absently, and whistling below his breath.

When he finally looked round again his face cleared.

"Ah, that's better! Sit down, and we'll talk. By Jove, isn't it colossal? They told me over at the fort that I was a fool to come across to-night. But I simply couldn't keep you waiting another night. Besides, I knew you would expect me."

Conyers' grim face softened a little. He could scarcely have said how he had ever come to be the chosen friend of young Hugh Palliser. The intimacy had been none of his seeking.

They had met at the club on the occasion of one of his rare appearances there, and the younger man whose sociable habit it was to know everyone, had scraped acquaintance with him.

No one knew much about Conyers. He was not fond of society, and, as a natural consequence, society was not fond of him. He occupied the humble position of a subordinate clerk in an engineer's office. The work was hard, but it did not bring him prosperity. He was one of those men who go silently on week after week, year after year, till their very existence comes almost to be overlooked by those about them.

He never seemed to suffer as other men suffered from the scorching heat of that tropical corner of the Indian Empire. He was always there, whatever happened to the rest of the world; but he never pushed himself forward. He seemed to lack ambition. There were even some who said he lacked brains as well.

But Palliser was not of these. His quick eyes had detected at a glance something that others had never taken the trouble to discover. From the very beginning he had been aware of a force that contained itself in this silent man. He had become interested, scarcely knowing why; and, having at length overcome the prickly hedge of reserve which was at first opposed to his advances, he had entered the private place which it defended, and found within what he certainly had not expected to find—a genius.

It was nearly three months now since Conyers, in a moment of unusual expansion, had laid before him the invention at which he had been working for so many silent years. The thing even then, though complete in all essentials, had lacked finish, and this final touch young Palliser, himself a gunner with a positive passion for guns, had been able to supply. He had seen the value of the invention and had given it his ardent support. He had, moreover, friends in high place and could obtain a fair and thorough investigation of the idea.

This he had accomplished, with a result that had transcended his highest hopes, on his friend's behalf and he now proceeded to pour out his information with an accompanying stream of congratulation,

ich Conyers sat and listened with scarcely the vement of an eyelid.

Hugh Palliser found his impassivity by no means appointing. He was used to it. He had even pected it. That momentary unsteadiness on Coners' part had astonished him far more.

Concluding his narration, he laid the official correspondence before him, and got up to open the door. The night was black and terrible, the heat came in overwhelming puffs, as though blown from a blast-furnace. He leaned against the doorpost and wiped his forehead. The oppression of the atmosphere was like a tangible, crushing weight. Behind him the paper on the wall rustled vaguely, but there was no other sound. After several minutes he turned briskly back again into the room, whistling a sentimental melody below his breath.

"Well, old chap, it was worth waiting for, eh? And now, I suppose, you'll be making a bee-line for home, you lucky beggar. I shan't be long after you, that's the comfort. Pity we can't go together. I suppose you can't wait till the winter."

"No, my boy. I'm afraid I can't." Conyers spoke with a faint smile, his eyes still fixed upon the blue official paper that held his destiny. "I'm going home northward, and be damned to everything and everybody—except you. It's an understood thing, you know, Palliser, that we are partners in this deal."

"Oh, rot!" exclaimed Palliser impetuously. "I don't agree to that. I did nothing but polish the thing up. You'd have done it yourself if I hadn't."

"In the course of a few more years," put in Conyers drily.

"Rot!" said Palliser again. "Besides, I don't want any pelf. I've quite as much as is good for me, more than I want. That's why I'm going to get married. You'll be going the same way yourself now, I suppose?"

"You have no reason whatever for thinking so," responded Conyers.

Palliser laughed lightheartedly and sat down on the table. "Oh, haven't I? What about that mysterious locked drawer of yours? Don't be shy, I say! You had it open when I came in. Show her to me like a good chap! I won't tell a soul."

"That's not where I keep my love-tokens," said Conyers, with a grim twist of the mouth that was not a smile.

"What then?" asked Palliser eagerly. "No another invention?"

"No." Conyers inserted the key in the lock again, turned it, and pulled open the drawer. "See for yourself as you are so anxious!"

Palliser leaned across the table and looked. The next instant his glance flashed upwards, and their eyes met.

There was a sharply-defined pause. Then, "You'll never be fool enough for that, Jack!" ejaculated Palliser, with vehemence.

"I'm fool enough for anything," said Conyers, with his cynical smile.

"But you wouldn't," the other protested almost

coherently. "A fellow like you—I don't believe
"

"It's loaded," observed Conyers quietly. "No,
we it alone, Hugh! It can remain so for the pre-
it. There is not the smallest danger of its going
—or I shouldn't have shown it to you."

He closed the drawer again, looking steadily into
ugh Palliser's face.

"I've had it by me for years," he said, "just in case
e Fates should have one more trick in store for me.
it apparently they haven't, though it's never safe to
sume anything."

"Oh, don't talk like an idiot!" broke in Palliser
atedly. "I've no patience with that sort of thing
o you expect me to believe that a fellow like you—
fellow who knows how to wait for his luck—would
ve way to a cowardly impulse and destroy himself
l in a moment because things didn't go quite
raight? Man alive! I know you better than that.
c if I don't, I've never known you at all."

"Ah! Perhaps not!" said Conyers.

Once more he turned the key and withdrew it
le pushed back his chair so that his face was in
adow.

"You don't know everything, you know, Hugh," he
aid.

"Have a smoke," said Palliser, "and tell me what
ou are driving at!"

He threw himself into a bamboo chair by the open
loor, the light streaming full upon him, revealing in
very line of him the arrogant splendour of his youth

He looked like a young Greek god with the world at his feet.

Conyers surveyed him with his faint, cynical smile. "No," he said, "you certainly don't know everything my son. You have never come a cropper in your life."

"Haven't I, though?" Hugh sat up, eager to refute this criticism. "That's all you know about it. I suppose you think you have had the monopoly of hard knocks. Most people do."

"I am not like most people," Conyers asserted deliberately. "But you needn't tell me that you have never been right under, my boy. For you never have."

"Depends what you call going under," protested Palliser. "I've been down a good many times, heaven knows. And I've had to wait—as you have—all the best years of my life."

"Your best years are to come," rejoined Conyers. "Mine are over."

"Oh, rot, man! Rot—rot—rot! Why, you are just coming into your own! Have another drink and give me the toast of your heart!" Hugh Palliser sprang impulsively to his feet. "Let me mix it. You can't—you shan't be melancholy to-night of these nights."

But Conyers stayed his hand.

"Only one more drink to-night, boy!" he said. "And that not yet. Sit down and smoke! I'm a melancholy, but I can't rejoice prematurely. It's no my way."

"Prematurely!" echoed Hugh, pointing to the official envelope.

"Yes, prematurely," Conyers repeated. "I may be as rich as Cræsus, and yet not win my heart's desire."

"Oh, I know that," said Hugh quickly. "I've been through it myself. It's infernal to have everything else under the sun and yet to lack the one thing—the one essential—the one woman."

He sat down again, abruptly thoughtful. Conyers smoked silently, with his face in the shadow.

Suddenly Hugh looked across at him.

"You think I'm too much of an infant to understand," he said. "I'm nearly thirty, but that's a detail."

"I'm forty-five," said Conyers.

"Well, well!" Hugh frowned impatiently. "It's a detail, as I said before. Who cares for a year more or less?"

"Which means," observed Conyers, with his dry smile, "that the one woman is older than you are."

"She is," Palliser admitted recklessly. "She is five years older. But what of it? Who cares? We were made for each other. What earthly difference does it make?"

"It's no one's business but your own," remarked Conyers through a haze of smoke.

"Of course it isn't. It never has been." Hugh yet sounded in some fashion indignant. "There never was any other possibility for me after I met her. I waited for her six mortal years. I'd have waited all my life. But she gave in at last. I think she realized that it was sheer waste of time to go on."

"What was she waiting for?" The question came

with a certain weariness of intonation, as though the speaker were somewhat bored; but Hugh Palliser was too engrossed to notice.

He stretched his arms wide with a swift and passionate gesture.

"She was waiting for a scamp," he declared. "It is maddening to think of—the sweetest woman on earth, Conyers, wasting her spring and her summer over a myth, an illusion. It was an affair of fifteen years ago. The fellow came to grief and disappointed her. She told me all about it on the day she promised to marry me. I believe her heart was nearly broken at the time, but she has got over it—thank heaven!—at last. Poor Damaris! My Damaris!"

He ceased to speak, and a dull roar of thunder came out of the night like the voice of a giant in anguish.

Hugh began to smoke, still busy with his thoughts.

"Yes," he said presently, "I believe she would actually have waited all her life for the fellow if he had asked it of her. Luckily he didn't go so far. He was utterly unworthy of her. I think I see it now. His father was imprisoned for forgery and no doubt he was in the know, though it could not be brought home to him. He was ruined, of course, and he disappeared, just dropped out, when the crash came. He had been on the verge of proposing to her immediately before. And she would have married him too. She cared."

He sent a cloud of smoke upwards with savour and vigour.

"It's damnable to think of her suffering for a worthless brute like that!" he exclaimed. "She had such faith in him too. Year after year she was expecting him to go back to her, and she kept me at arm's length, till at last she came to see that both our lives were being sacrificed to a miserable dream. Well, it's my innings now, anyway. And we are going to be superbly happy to make up for it."

Again he flung out his arms with a wide gesture, and again out of the night there came a long roll of thunder that was like the menace of a tortured thing. A flicker of lightning gleamed through the open door for a moment, and Conyer's dark face was made visible. He had ceased to smoke, and was staring with fixed, inscrutable eyes into the darkness. He did not flinch from the lightning; it was as if he did not see it.

"What would she do, I wonder, if the prodigal returned," he said quietly. "Would she be glad—or sorry?"

"He never will," returned Hugh quickly. "He never can—after fifteen years. Think of it! Besides—she wouldn't have him if he did."

"Women are proverbially faithful," remarked Conyers cynically.

"She will stick to me now," Hugh returned with confidence. "The other fellow is probably dead. In any case, he has no shadow of a right over her. He never even asked her to wait for him."

"Possibly he thought that she would wait without being asked," said Conyers, still cynical.

"Well, she has ceased to care for him now," asserted Hugh. "She told me so herself."

The man opposite shifted his position ever so slightly. "And you are satisfied with that?" he said.

"Of course I am. Why not?" There was almost a challenge in Hugh's voice.

"And if he came back?" persisted the other. "You would still be satisfied?"

Hugh sprang to his feet with a movement of fierce impatience. "I believe I should shoot him!" he said vindictively. He looked like a splendid wild animal suddenly awakened. "I tell you, Conyers," he declared passionately, "I could kill him with my hands if he came between us now."

Conyers, his chin on his hand, looked him up and down as though appraising his strength.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright and spoke—spoke briefly, sternly, harshly, as a man speaks in the presence of his enemy. At the same instant a frightful crash of thunder swept the words away as though they had never been uttered.

In the absolute pandemonium of sound that followed, Hugh Palliser, with a face gone suddenly white, went over to his friend and stood behind him, his hands upon his shoulders.

But Conyers sat quite motionless, staring forth at the leaping lightning, rigid, sphinxlike. He did not seem aware of the man behind him, till, as the uproar began to subside, Hugh bent and spoke.

"Do you know, old chap, I'm scared!" he said, with a faint, shamed laugh. "I feel as if there were devils

Conyers waited till Hugh had drained his glass before he lifted his own.

Then, "I drink to the one woman," he said, and emptied it at a draught.

* * * * *

The storm was over, and a horse's feet clattered away into the darkness, mingling rhythmically with a cheery tenor voice.

In the room with the open door a man's figure stood for a long while motionless.

When he moved at length it was to open the locked drawer of the writing-table. His right hand felt within it, closed upon something that lay there; and then he paused.

Several minutes crawled away.

From afar there came the long rumble of thunder. But it was not this that he heard as he stood wrestling with the fiercest temptation he had ever known.

Stiffly at last he stooped, peered into the drawer, finally closed it with an unfaltering hand. The struggle was over.

"For your sake, Damaris!" he said aloud, and he spoke without cynicism. "I should know how to wait by now—even for death—which is all I have to wait for."

And with that he pulled the fluttering paper from the wall, crushed it in his hand, and went out heavily into the night.

NOTE.—This story was originally published in the *Red Magazine*, and is now reprinted by permission of the Proprietors.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR

CHAPTER I

HIS OWN GROUND

OH, to be a farmer's wife!"

Doris Elliot paused, punt-pole in hand, to look across a field of corn-sheaves with eyes of shining appreciation.

Her companion, stretched luxuriously on his back on a pile of cushions, smiled a contemplative smile and made no comment.

The girl's look came down to him after a moment. She regarded him with friendly contempt.

"You're very lazy, Hugh," she said.

"I know it," said Hugh Chesyl comfortably.

She dropped the pole into the water and drove the punt towards the bank. "It's a pity you're such a slacker," she said.

He removed his cigarette momentarily. "You wouldn't like me any better if I weren't," he said.

"Indeed I should—miles!"

"No, you wouldn't." His smile became more pronounced. "If I were more energetic, I should be forever pestering you to marry me. And, you know, you wouldn't like that. As it is, I take 'No' for an answer and rest content."

Doris was silent. Her slim, white-clad figure was bent to the task of bringing the punt to a pleasant anchorage in an inviting hollow in the grassy shore

Hugh Chesyl clasped his hands behind his head and watched her with placid admiration.

The small brown hands were very capable. They knew exactly what to do, and did it with precision. When they had finally secured the punt, with a shove in it, to the bank he sat up.

"Are we going to have tea here? What a charming spot! Sweetly romantic, isn't it? I wonder you particularly want to be a farmer's wife."

Doris's pointed chin still looked slightly so. "You wouldn't wonder if you took the trouble to reflect, Mr. Chesyl," she said.

He laughed easily. "Oh, don't ask me to do that. You know what a sluggish brain mine is. I can't understand your not wanting to marry me, but you should want to marry a farmer—like Jeff Ironside—I cannot see."

"Who is Jeff Ironside?" she demanded.

"He's the chap who owns this property. I don't know you know? A frightfully energetic person; energetic, too, for a wonder. But an absolute terror to my dear. I shouldn't marry him—all his faults notwithstanding—if I were you. I don't think the county would approve."

Doris snapped her fingers with supreme contempt. "That for the county! What a snob you are."

"Am I?" said Hugh. "I didn't know."

She nodded severely. "Do you mind moving your legs? I want to get at the tea-basket."

"Don't mention it!" he said accommodately.

"Are you going to give me tea now? How nice! You are looking awfully pretty to-day, do you know?"

I can't think how you do it. There isn't a feature in your face worth mentioning, but, notwithstanding, you make an entrancing whole."

Doris sternly repressed a smile. "Please don't take the trouble to be complimentary!"

Hugh groaned. "There's no pleasing you. And still you haven't let me into the secret as to why you want to be a farmer's wife."

Doris was unpacking the tea-things energetically. "You never understand anything without being told," she said. "Don't you know that I positively hate the life I live now?"

"I can quite believe it," said Hugh Chesyl. "But, if you will allow me to say so, I think your remedy would be worse than the disease. Your utmost ingenuity will fail to persuade me that the life of a farmer's wife would suit you."

"I should like the simplicity of it," she maintained.

"And getting up at five in the morning to make the butter? And having a hulking brute of a husband—like Jeff Ironside—tramping into your kitchen with his muddy boots and beastly clothes (which you would have to mend) just when you had got things into good order? I can see you doing it!" Hugh Chesyl's speech went into his easy, high-bred laugh. "You of all people—the dainty and disdainful Miss Elliot, for whom no man is good enough!"

"I don't know why you say that." There was quick protest in the girl's voice. She clattered the cups and saucers as if something in the lazy argument had exasperated her. "I like a man who is a man—the hard, outdoor, wholesome kind—who isn't afraid

Doris perversely. "It's a sign of laziness and—yes—weakness of purpose."

"Oh, is it?" Again he uttered his good-tempered laugh; then, as he began to drink his tea, he gradually sobered. "Has anything happened lately to make you specially discontented with your lot?" he asked presently.

Doris's brows contracted. "Things are always happening. My stepmother gets more unbearable every day. I sometimes think I will go and work for my living, but my father won't hear of it. And what can I do? I haven't qualified for anything. The only thing open to me is to fill a post of unpaid companion to a rich and elderly cousin who would put up with me but doesn't much want me. She lives at Kensington, too, and I can only breathe in the country."

"Poor little girl!" said Hugh kindly.

"Oh, don't pity me!" she said quickly. "You can't do anything to help. And I shouldn't grumble to you if there were anyone else to grumble to." She leaned back against her sheaf with her eyes on the sunlit water below. "I suppose I shall just go on in the same old way till something happens. Anyhow, I can't see my way out at present. It's such a shame to be unhappy, too, when life might be so ecstatic."

"How could life be ecstatic?" asked Hugh, passing up his cup to be refilled.

She threw him a quick glance. "You wouldn't understand if I were to tell you," she said. "It never could be—for you."

He sighed. "I know I'm very limited. But it's a mistake to expect too much from life, believe me. Ask

but little, and perhaps—if you're lucky—you won't be disappointed!"

"I would rather have nothing than that," she said quickly.

Hugh Chesyl turned and regarded her curiously "Would you really?" he said.

She nodded several times emphatically. "Yes, just live my own life out of doors and do without everything else." She pulled a long stalk of corn from the sheaf against which she rested and looked at it thoughtfully. Her eyes were downcast, and the man in the punt could not see the deep shadow of pain they held. "If I can't have corn," she said slowly, with the air of one pronouncing sentence, "I won't have husks. I will die of starvation sooner."

And with that very suddenly she rose and walked round the sheaf.

The movement was abrupt, so abrupt that Hugh Chesyl lifted his brows in astonishment. He was still more surprised a moment later when he heard her clear, girlish voice raised in admonition.

"I don't think it's very nice of you to lie there listening and not to let us know."

Hugh sat upright in the punt. Who on earth was it that she was reproving thus?

The next moment he saw. A huge man with the frame of a bull rose from behind the sheaf and confronted his young companion. He had his hat in his hand, and the afternoon sun fell full upon his uncovered head, revealing a rugged, clean-shaven face that had in it a good deal of British strength and a suspicion of gipsy alertness. To Chesyl's further

amazement he did not appear in the least abashed by the encounter.

"I'm sorry I overheard you," he said, with blunt deference. "I was half-asleep at first. Afterwards, I didn't like to intrude."

Doris's grey eyes looked him up and down for a moment or two in silence, and a flush rose in her tanned face. It seemed to Hugh that she was likely to become the more embarrassed of the two, and he wondered if he ought to go to the rescue.

Then swiftly Doris collected her forces. "I suppose you know you are trespassing?" she said.

At that Hugh laid himself very suddenly down again in the bottom of the boat, and left her to fight her own battles.

The man on the bank looked down at his small assailant with a face of grim decorum. "No, I didn't know," he said.

"Well, you are," said Doris. "All this ground is private property. You can see for yourself. It's a cornfield."

The intruder's eyes travelled over the upstanding sheaves, passed gravely over the man in the punt, and came back to the girl. "Yes, I see," he said stolidly.

"Then don't you think you'd better go?" she said.

He put his hat on somewhat abruptly. "Yes. I think I had better," he said, and with that he turned on his heel and walked away through the stubble.

"Such impertinence!" said Doris, as she stepped down the bank to her companion.

"It was rather," said Hugh.

She looked at him somewhat sharply. "I don't see that there is anything to laugh at," she said.

"Don't you?" said Hugh.

"No. Why are you laughing?"

Hugh explained. "It only struck me as being a little funny that you should order the man off his own ground in that cavalier fashion."

"Hugh!" Genuine dismay shone in the girl's eyes. "That wasn't—wasn't——"

"Jeff Ironside? Yes, it was," said Hugh. "I wonder you have never come across him before. He works like a nigger."

"Hugh!" Doris collapsed upon the bank in sheer horror. "I have seen him before—seen him several times. I thought he was just—a labourer—till to-day."

"Oh, no," said Hugh. "He's just your hard, outdoor, wholesome farmer. Fine animal, isn't he? Always reminds me of a prize bull."

"How frightful!" said Doris with a gasp. "It's the worst *faux pas* I have ever made."

"Cheer up!" said Hugh consolingly. "No doubt he was flattered by the little attention. He took it very well."

"That doesn't make matters any better," said Doris. "I almost wish he hadn't."

Whereupon Hugh laughed again. "Oh, don't wish that! I should think he would be quite a nasty animal when roused. I shouldn't have cared to fight him on your behalf. He could wipe the earth with me were he so minded."

Doris's eyes, critical though not unkindly, rested upon him as he lay. "Yes," she said thoughtfully. "I should almost think he could."

CHAPTER II

THE PLOUGHMAN

It was on a day six weeks later that Doris Elliot next found herself upon the scene of her discomfiture. She had ridden from her home three miles distant very early on a morning of September to join a meet of the foxhounds and go cub-hunting. There had been a heavy fall of rain, and the ground was wet and slippery.

The field that had been all yellow with the shocks of corn was now in process of being ploughed, and her horse Hector sank up to the fetlocks at every stride, a fact which he resented with obvious impatience. She guided him down to the edge of the river where the ground looked a little harder.

The run was over and she had enjoyed it; but she wanted now to take as short a cut home as possible, and it was through this particular field that the most direct route undoubtedly lay. She was alone, but she knew every inch of the countryside, and but for this mischance of the plough she would have been well on her way. Being a sportswoman, she made the best of things, and did her utmost to soothe her mount's somewhat fiery temper.

"You shall have a clean jump at the end, Hector, old boy," she promised him. "We shall soon be out of it."

But in this matter also she was to receive a check; for when they came to the clean jump, it was to find a formidable fence of wooden paling confronting them, intervening directly in their line of march. It seemed

that the energetic owner had been attending to his boundaries with a zeal that no huntsman would appreciate

Doris bit her lip with a murmured "Too bad!"

There was nothing for it but to skirt the hedge in search of a gate. Hector was naturally even more indignant than she, and stamped and squealed as she turned him from the obstacle. He also wanted to get home, and he was tired of fighting his way through ploughed land that held him like a bog. To add to their discomfort it had begun to rain again, and there seemed every prospect of being speedily soaked to the skin.

Altogether the outlook was depressing; but some one was whistling cheerily on the farther side of the field, and Doris took heart. It was a long way to the gate, however, and when she reached it at length it was to find another disappointment in store. The gate was padlocked.

She looked round in desperation. Her only chance of escape was apparently to return by the way she had come, by means of a gap which had not yet been repaired, and which would lead her in directly the opposite direction to that which she desired to take.

The rain was coming down in a sharp shower, and Hector was becoming more and more restive. She halted him by the gate and looked over. Beyond lay a field from which she knew the road to be easily accessible. She hated to turn her back upon it.

Behind her over a rise came the plough, drawn by two stout horses, driven by a sturdy figure that loomed gigantic against the sky. Glancing back

Doris saw this figure, and an odd little spirit of dare-devilry entered into her. She did not want to come face to face with the ploughman, neither did she want to beat a retreat before the five-barred gate that opposed her progress.

She spoke to Hector reassuringly and backed him several paces. He was quick to grasp her desire and eager to fall in with it. She felt him bracing himself under her, and she laughed in sheer delight as she set him at the gate.

He went at it with a will over the broken ground, rose as she lifted him, and made a gallant effort to clear the obstacle. But he was too heavily handicapped. He slipped as he rose to the leap. He blundered badly against the top bar of the gate, finally stumbled over and fell on the other side, pitching his rider headlong into a slough of trampled mud.

He was up in a moment and careering across the field, but Doris was not so nimble. It was by no means her first tumble, nor had it been wholly unexpected; but she had fallen with considerable violence, and it took her a second or two to collect her wits. Then, like Hector, she sprang up—only to reel back through the slippery mud and catch at the splintered gate for support, there to cling sick and dizzy, with eyes fast shut, while the whole world rocked around her in chaos indescribable.

A full minute must have passed thus, then very suddenly out of the confusion came a voice. Vaguely she recognized it, but she was too occupied in the struggle to keep her senses to pay much attention to what it said.

"I mustn't faint!" she gasped desperately through her set teeth. "I mustn't faint!"

A steady arm encircled her, holding her up.

"You'll be all right in half a minute," said the voice, close to her now. "You came down rather hard."

She fought with herself and opened her eyes. Her head was swimming still, but she compelled herself to look.

Jeff Ironside was beside her, one foot lodged upon the lowest bar of the gate while he propped her against his bent knee.

He looked down at her with a certain sternness of demeanour that was characteristic of him. "Take your time!" he said. "It was a nasty knock out."

"I—I'm all right," she told him breathlessly. "Where—where is Hector?"

"If you mean your animal," he said in the slow, grim way which she began to remember as his, "he is probably well on his way home by now. He'll be all right," he added. "The gate from this field into the road is open."

"Oh!" The faintness was overcoming her again as she tried to stand. She clutched and held his arm. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I—never felt so stupid before."

"Don't be in a hurry!" he said. "You can't help it."

She sank back against his support again and so remained for a few seconds. He stood like a rock till she opened her eyes once more.

She found his own upon her, but he dropped them

instantly. "You are not hurt anywhere, are you?" he said.

She shook her head. "No, it's nothing. I've wrenched my shoulder a little, but it isn't much."

"Which shoulder?"

"The right. No, really it isn't serious." She winced as he touched it with his hand nevertheless.

"Sure?" he said.

He began to feel it very carefully, and she winced again with indrawn breath.

"It's only bruised," she said.

"It's painful, anyhow," he remarked bluntly. "Well, you must be wet to the skin. You had better come with me to the mill and get dry."

Doris flushed a little. "Oh, thank you, but really—I don't want to trespass on your kindness. I can quite well walk home—from here."

"You can't," he said flatly. "Anyhow, you are not going to try. You had better let me carry you."

But Doris drew back at that with swift decision. "Oh no! I am quite well now—I can walk."

She stood up and he took his foot from the gate. She glanced at the top bar thereof that hung in splinters.

"I'm so sorry," she murmured apologetically.

He also looked at his damaged property. "Yes, it was a pity you attempted it," he said.

"I shall know better next time," she said with a wry smile. "Will it cost much?"

"Well, it can't be mended for nothing," said Jeff Ironside. "Things never are."

Doris considered him for a moment. He was cer-

tainly a fine animal, as Hugh Chesyl had said, well made and well put together. She liked the freedom of his pose, the strength of the great bull neck. At close quarters he certainly did not look like an ordinary labourer. He had an air of command that his rough clothes could not hide. There was nothing of the clodhopper about him albeit he followed the plough. He was obviously a son of the soil, and he would wrest his living therefrom, but he would do it with brain as well as hands. He had a wide forehead above his somewhat sombre eyes.

"I am very sorry," she said again.

"I am sorry for you," he said. "Wouldn't it be as well to get out of this rain? It's only a step to the mill."

She turned with docility and looked towards the two horses standing patiently where he had left them on the brown slope of the hill.

"Not that way," he said. "Come across this field to the road! It is no distance from there."

Doris began to gather up her skirt. It was wet through and caked with mud. She caught her breath again as she did it. The pain in her shoulder was becoming intense.

And then to her amazement, Jeff Ironside suddenly stooped and put his arms about her. Almost before she realized his intention, and while she was still gasping her astonishment, he had lifted her and begun to move with long, easy strides over the sodden turf.

"Oh," she said, "you—you—really you shouldn't!"

"It's the only thing to do," he returned.

And somehow—perhaps because he spoke with such finality—she did not feel inclined to dispute the point. She submitted with a confused murmur of thanks.

CHAPTER III

THE APOLOGY

ON an old oaken settle, cushioned like a church-pew, before a generous, open fire, Doris began to forget her woes. She looked about her with interest while she endeavoured to sip a cup of steaming milk treated with brandy that Jeff Ironside had brought her.

An old, old woman hobbled about the oak-raftered kitchen behind her while Jeff himself knelt before her and unlaced her mud-caked boots. She would have protested against his doing this had protest been of the smallest avail, but when she attempted it he only smiled a faint, grim smile and continued his task.

As he finally drew them off she thanked him in a small, shy voice. "You are very kind—much kinder than I deserve," she said. "Do you know I've often thought that I ought to have come to apologize for— for ordering you off your own ground that day in the summer?"

He looked up at her as he knelt, and for the first time she heard him laugh. There was something almost boyish in his laugh. It transformed him utterly, and it had a marvellous effect upon her. She laughed also, and was instantly at her ease. She

suddenly discovered that he was young in spite of his ruggedness, and she warmed to him in consequence.

"But I really was sorry," she protested. "And I knew I ought to have told you so before. But, somehow"—she flushed under his eyes—"I hadn't the courage. Besides, I didn't know you."

"It wasn't a very serious offence, was it?" he asked.

"I should have been furious in your place," she said.

"It takes more than that to make me angry," said Jeff Ironside.

She put out her hand to him impulsively, the flush still in her cheeks.

"I am still perfectly furious with myself," she told him, "whenever I think about it."

His hand enclosed hers in an all-enveloping grasp. "Then I shouldn't think about it any more if I were you," he said.

"Very well, I won't," said Doris: adding with her own quaint air of graciousness, "and thank you for being so friendly about it."

He released her hand somewhat abruptly and got to his feet. "How is your shoulder now? Any better?"

"Oh, yes, it's better," she assured him. "Only rather stiff. Now, won't you sit down and have your breakfast? Please don't bother about me any more! I've wasted quite enough of your time."

He turned towards the table. "You must have some too. And then, when you're ready, I will drive you home."

"Oh, but that will waste your time still more," she protested. "I'm sure I can walk."

"I'm sure you won't try," he rejoined with blunt deliberation. "I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen, Miss Elliot. I would have had a fire in the parlour if I had expected you."

"But, of course, I don't mind," she said. "And it's quite the finest old kitchen I've ever seen."

He turned to the old woman who still hovered in the background. "All right, Granny! Sit down and have your own!"

"I'll wait on the lady first, Master Jeff," she returned, smiling upon him.

"No. I'm going to wait on the lady," said Jeff. "You sit down!"

He had his way. It occurred to Doris that he usually did so. And presently he was waiting upon her as she lay against the cushions, as though she had been a princess in distress.

Their intimacy progressed steadily during the meal, and very soon Doris's shyness had wholly worn away. She could not quite decide if Jeff were shy or not. He was obviously quiet by nature. But his grimness certainly disappeared, and more than once she found herself wondering at his consideration and thought for her.

He went out after breakfast to put in the horse, and at once his old housekeeper expanded into ardent praise of him.

"He works as hard as ten men," she said. "That's how it is he gets on. I often think to myself that he works harder than he ought. It's all work and no play with him. But there, it's no good my talking. He only laughs at me, though I brought him up from

his cradle. And a fine baby he was to be sure. His poor mother—she came of gentlefolk, ran away from home she did to marry Farmer Ironside—she died three days after he was born, which was a pity, for the old master was just wrapped up in her, and was never the same again. Well, as I was saying, his poor mother, she'd set her heart on his being given the education of a gentleman; which he was, but he always clung to the land did Master Jeff. He was sent to Fordstead Grammar School along with the gentry, and a fine figure he cut there. But then his father died, and he had to settle down to farming at seventeen, and he's been farming ever since. He's very well-to-do is Master Jeff, thanks to his own energy and perseverance; for farming isn't what it was. But it's time he took a rest and looked about him. He's thirty come Michaelmas, and he ought to be settling down. As I say to him: 'Granny Grimshaw won't be here for always, and you won't like any other kind of housekeeper save and unless she's a wife as well.' He always laughs at me," said Granny Grimshaw, shaking her head. "But it's true as the sun's above us. Master Jeff ought to be stirring himself to find a wife. But he'll go to the gentry for one, same as his father did before him. He won't be satisfied with any of them saucy country lasses. He don't ever mix with them. He'll look high will Master Jeff if the time ever comes that he looks at all. He's a gentleman himself right through to the backbone, and he'll marry a lady."

By the time Jeff returned to announce that the rain had ceased and the cart was waiting, there were not

"I'm sure you won't try," he rejoined with blunt deliberation. "I hope you don't mind eating in the kitchen, Miss Elliot. I would have had a fire in the parlour if I had expected you."

"But, of course, I don't mind," she said. "And it's quite the finest old kitchen I've ever seen."

He turned to the old woman who still hovered in the background. "All right, Granny! Sit down and have your own!"

"I'll wait on the lady first, Master Jeff," she returned, smiling upon him.

"No. I'm going to wait on the lady," said Jeff. "You sit down!"

He had his way. It occurred to Doris that he usually did so. And presently he was waiting upon her as she lay against the cushions, as though she had been a princess in distress.

Their intimacy progressed steadily during the meal, and very soon Doris's shyness had wholly worn away. She could not quite decide if Jeff were shy or not. He was obviously quiet by nature. But his grimness certainly disappeared, and more than once she found herself wondering at his consideration and thought for her.

He went out after breakfast to put in the horse, and at once his old housekeeper expanded into ardent praise of him.

"He works as hard as ten men," she said. "That's how it is he gets on. I often think to myself that he works harder than he ought. It's all work and no play with him. But there, it's no good my talking. He only laughs at me, though I brought him up from

his cradle. And a fine baby he was to be sure. His poor mother—she came of gentlefolk, ran away from home she did to marry Farmer Ironside—she died three days after he was born, which was a pity, for the old master was just wrapped up in her, and was never the same again. Well, as I was saying, his poor mother, she'd set her heart on his being given the education of a gentleman; which he was, but he always clung to the land did Master Jeff. He was sent to Fordstead Grammar School along with the gentry, and a fine figure he cut there. But then his father died, and he had to settle down to farming at seventeen, and he's been farming ever since. He's very well-to-do is Master Jeff, thanks to his own energy and perseverance; for farming isn't what it was. But it's time he took a rest and looked about him. He's thirty come Michaelmas, and he ought to be settling down. As I say to him: 'Granny Grimshaw won't be here for always, and you won't like any other kind of housekeeper save and unless she's a wife as well.' He always laughs at me," said Granny Grimshaw, shaking her head. "But it's true as the sun's above us. Master Jeff ought to be stirring himself to find a wife. But he'll go to the gentry for one, same as his father did before him. He won't be satisfied with any of them saucy country lasses. He don't ever mix with them. He'll look high will Master Jeff if the time ever comes that he looks at all. He's a gentleman himself right through to the backbone, and he'll marry a lady."

By the time Jeff returned to announce that the rain had ceased and the cart was waiting, there were not

many of his private affairs of the knowledge of which Doris had not been placed in possession.

She was smiling a little to herself over the old woman's garrulous confidences when he entered, and it was evident that he caught the smile, for he looked from her to his housekeeper with a touch of sharpness.

Granny Grimshaw hastened to efface herself with apologetic promptitude, and retired to the scullery to wash up.

Doris turned at once to her host. "Will you take me over the mill some day?" she asked.

He looked momentarily surprised at the suggestion, and then in a second he smiled. "Of course. When will you come?"

"On Sunday?" she ventured.

"It won't be working then."

"No. But other days you are busy."

Jeff dropped upon his knees again in front of her, and turned his attention to brushing the worst of the mud from her skirt. He attacked it with extreme vigour, his smooth lips firmly shut.

At the end of nearly a minute he paused. "I shan't be too busy for that any day," he said.

"Not really?" Doris sounded a little doubtful.

He looked at her, and somehow his brown eyes made her lower her own. They held a mastery, a confidence, that embarrassed her subtly and quite inexplicably.

"Come any time," he said, "except market-day! Mrs. Grimshaw will always know where I am to be found, and will send me word."

She nodded. "I shall come one morning then. I will ride round, shall I?"

He returned to his task, faintly smiling. "Don't take any five-barred gates on your way!" he said.

"No, I shan't do that again," she promised. "Five-barred gates have their drawbacks."

"As well as their advantages," said Jeff Ironside enigmatically.

CHAPTER IV

CORN

"MASTER JEFF!" The kitchen door opened with a nervous creak and a wrinkled brown face, encircled by the frills of a muslin night-cap, peered cautiously in. "Are you asleep, my dear?" asked Granny Grimshaw with tender solicitude.

He was sitting at the table with his elbows upon it and his head in his hands. She saw the smoke curling upwards from his pipe, and rightly deduced from this that he was not asleep.

She came forward, candle in hand. "Master Jeff, you'll pardon me, I'm sure. But it's getting so late—nigh upon twelve o'clock. You won't be getting anything of a night's rest if you don't go to bed."

Jeff raised his head. His eyes, sombre with thought, met hers. "Is it late?" he said abstractedly.

"And you such an early riser," said Granny Grimshaw.

She went across to the fire and began to rake it out, he watching her in silence, still with that sombre look in his dark eyes.

Very suddenly Granny Grimshaw turned and, poker in hand, confronted him. She was wearing a large Paisley shawl over her pink flannel nightdress, but the figure she presented, though quaint, was not unimposing.

"Master Jeff," she said, "don't you be too modest and retiring, my dear! You're just as good as the best of 'em."

A slow, rather hard smile drew the corners of the man's mouth. "They don't think so," he observed.

"They mayn't," said Granny Grimshaw severely. "But that don't alter what is. You're a good man and, what's more, a man of substance, which is better than can be said for old Colonel Elliot, with one foot in the grave, so to speak, and up to his eyes in debt. He owes money all over the place, I'm told, and the place is mortgaged for three times its proper value. His wife has a little of her own, so they say; but this poor young lady as was here this morning, she'll be thrown on the world without a penny to her name. A winsome young lady, too, Master Jeff. And she don't look as if she were made to stand many hard knocks. She may belong to the county, as they say, but her heart's in the right place. She'd make a bonny mistress in this old place, and it wants a mistress badly enough. Old Granny Grimshaw has done her best, my dear, and always will. But she isn't the woman she was." An odd, wheedling note crept into the old woman's voice. "She'll be wanting to sit in the chimney-corner soon, Master Jeff, and just mind the little ones. You wouldn't refuse her that?"

Jeff rose abruptly and went across to the fire to knock the ashes from his pipe. Having done so, he remained bent for several seconds, as though he were trying to read his fortune in the dying embers. Then very slowly he straightened himself and spoke.

"I think you forget," he said, "that Colonel Elliot was the son of an earl."

But Granny Grimshaw remained unabashed and wholly unimpressed. She laid down the poker with decision. "I was never one to sneer at good birth," she said. "But I hold that you come of a breed as old and as good as any in the land. Your father was a yeoman of the good old-fashioned sort; and your mother—well, everyone hereabouts knows that she was a lady born and bred. I don't see what titles have to do with breeding," said Granny Grimshaw stoutly. "Not that I despise the aristocracy. Dear me, no! But when all is said and done, no man can be better than a gentleman, and no woman can look higher. And there are gentlemen in every walk of life just the same as there are the other sort. And you, Master Jeff, you're one of the gentlemen."

Jeff laughed a somewhat grim laugh, and turned to put out the lamp.

"You're a very nice old woman, Granny," he said. "But you are not an impartial judge."

"Ah, my dearie," said Granny Grimshaw, "but I know what women's hearts are made of."

A somewhat irrelevant retort, which nevertheless closed the discussion.

They went upstairs together, and parted on the landing.

"And you'll go to bed now, won't you?" urged Granny Grimshaw.

"All right," said Jeff.

But once in his own room he went to the low lattice-window that overlooked the mill-stream, and stood before it looking gravely forth over the still water. It was a night of many stars. Beyond the stream there stretched a dream-valley across which the river-mists were trailing. The tall trees in the meadows stood up with a ghostly magnificence against them. The whole scene was one of wondrous peace, and all, as far as he could see, was his. But the man's eyes brooded over his acres with a dumb dissatisfaction, and when he turned from the window at last it was with a gesture of hopelessness.

"God help me for a fool!" he muttered between his teeth. "If I went near her, they would kick me out by the back door."

He began to undress with savage energy, and finally flung himself down on the old four-poster in which his father had lain before him, lying there motionless, with fixed and sleepless eyes, while the hours went by over his head.

Once—it was just before day-break—he rose and went again to the open window that overlooked his prosperous valley. A change had come over the face of it. The mists were lifting, lifting. He saw the dark forms of cattle standing here and there. The river wound, silent and mysterious, away into the dim, yet distance. A church clock struck, its tone vague and remote as a voice from another world. And as in answer to its solemn call a lark soared upwards

from the meadow by the mill-stream with a burst of song.

The east was surely lightening. The night was gone. Jeff leaned his burning temple against the window-frame with a feeling akin to physical sickness. He was tired—dead tired; but he knew that he could not sleep now. The world was waking. From the farmyard round the corner of the house there came the flap of wings and the old rooster's blatant greeting to the dawn.

In another half-hour the whole place would be stirring. He had wasted a whole night's rest.

Fiercely he straightened himself. Surely his brain must be going! Why, he had only spoken to her twice. And then, like a spirit that mocked, the words ran through his brain. "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?"

So this was love, was it? This—was love!

With clenched hands he stood looking out to the dawning, while the wild fever leaped and seethed in his veins. He called up before his inner vision the light, dainty figure, the level, grey eyes, fearless, yet in a fashion shy; the glow of the sun-tanned skin, the soft, thick hair, brown in the shadow, gold in the sun.

Straight before him, low in the sky, hung the morning star. It almost looked as if it were drifting earthwards with all its purity, all its glistening sweetness, drifting straight to the heart of the world. He fixed his eyes upon it, drawn by its beauty almost in spite of himself. It was the only star in the sky, and it almost seemed as if it had a message for him.

But the day was dawning, the star fading, and the

message hard to read. Why had she refused to marry Chesyl, he asked himself? The man was lukewarm in speech and action; but that surely was but the way of the world to which he belonged. No excess of emotion was ever encouraged there. Doubtless behind that amiable mask there beat the same devouring longing that throbbed in his own racing pulses. Surely Doris knew this! Surely she understood her own kind!

He recalled those words of hers that he had overheard, the slow utterance of them as of some pronouncement of doom. "If I can't have corn, I won't have husks. I will die of starvation sooner."

He had caught the pain in those words. Had Hugh Chesyl failed to do so? If so, Hugh Chesyl was a fool. He had never thought very highly of him, though he supposed him to be clever after his own indolent fashion.

Chesyl was the old squire's nephew and heir—a highly suitable *parti* for any girl. Yet Doris had refused him, not wholly without ignominy. A gentleman, too! Jeff's mouth twisted. The thought came to him, and ripened to steady conviction, that had Chesyl taken the trouble to woo, he must in time have won. The girl was miserable enough to admit the fact of her misery, and he offered her marriage with him as a friendly means of escape. On other ground he could have won her. On this ground he was probably the least likely man to win. She asked for corn, and he offered husks. What wonder that she preferred starvation!

His hands were still clenched as he turned from the

window. Oh, to have been in Hugh Chesyl's place! She would have had no complaint then to make as to the quality of his offering. He would never have suffered her to go hungry. And yet the feeling that Hugh Chesyl loved her lingered still in his soul. Ah, what a fool! What a fool!

It was nearly three hours later that Jim Dawlish the miller answered Jeff Ironside's gruff morning greeting with an eager, "Have you heard the news, sir?"

Dawlish was of a cheery, expansive disposition, and not much of the village gossip ever escaped him or remained with him.

"What news?" demanded Jeff.

"Why, about the old Colonel up at the Place, to be sure," said Dawlish, advancing his floury person towards the doorway in which stood the master's square, strong figure.

"Colonel Elliot?" queried Jeff sharply. "What about him?"

Dawlish wagged a knowing head. "Ah, you may well ask that, sir. He died—early this morning—quite unexpected. Had a fit or some'at. They say it's an open question whether there'll be enough money to bury him. He has creditors all over the county."

"Good heavens!" said Jeff. He drew back swiftly into the open air as if he found the atmosphere of the mill oppressive. "Are you quite sure it's true?" he questioned. "How did you hear?"

"It's true enough," said the miller, with keen enjoyment. "I heard it from the police-sergeant. He says

it was so sudden that there'll have to be an inquest. I'm sorry for the widow and orphans, though. It'll fall a bit hard on them."

"Good heavens!" said Jeff again. "Good heavens!"

And then very abruptly he turned and left the mill.

"What's the matter with the boss?" asked the miller's underling. "Did the Colonel owe him money too?"

"That's about the ticket," said Jim Dawlish cheerily. "That comes of lending, that does. It just shows the truth of the old saying, 'Stick to your money and your money'll stick to you.' There never was a truer word."

"Wonder if he's lost much," said the underling speculatively.

Whereupon Jim Dawlish waxed suddenly severe. He never tolerated idle gossip among his inferiors. "And that's no concern of yours, Charlie Bates," he said. "You get on with your work and don't bother your pudden head about what ain't in no way your business! Mr. Ironside is about the soundest man within fifty miles, and don't you forget it!"

"He wasn't best pleased to hear about the poor old Colonel though for all that," said Charlie Bates tenaciously. "And I'd give something to know what'll come of it."

If he had known, neither he nor Jim Dawlish would have got through much work that morning.

CHAPTER V

A BARGAIN

s nearly a fortnight after Colonel Elliot's death Jeff Ironside went to the stable somewhat suddenly one morning, saddled his mare, and, without a word to anyone, rode away.

Granny Grimshaw was the only witness of his departure, and she turned from the kitchen window with a secret smile and nod.

It was an autumn morning of mist and sunshine. The beech trees shone golden overhead, and the robins trilled loudly from the clematis-draped hedges. Jeff rode briskly, with too set a purpose to bestow any attention upon these things. He took a short cut across his own land and entered the grounds belonging to the Place by a side drive seldom used.

Then he rode direct to the front door of the great Georgian house and boldly demanded admittance.

The footman who opened to him looked him up and down interrogatively. "Miss Elliot is at home, but I don't know if she will see anyone," he said uncompromisingly.

"Ask her!" said Jeff tersely. "My name is Ironside."

While the man was gone he took the mare to a yew tree that shadowed the drive at a few yards' distance and tied her to it. There was an air of grim resolution about all his actions. This accomplished, he returned to the great front door.

As he reached it there came the sound of light,

hastening feet within, and in a moment the half-open door was thrown back. Doris herself, very slim and pale, but withal very queenly in her deep mourning, came forth with outstretched hand to greet him.

"But why did they leave you here?" she said "Please come in!"

He followed her in with scarcely a word.

She led him down a long oak passage to a room that was plainly the library, and there in her quick gracious way she turned and faced him.

"I am very pleased to see you, Mr. Ironside. I was going to write to you to thank you again for all your kindness, but lately—there has been so much to think about—so much to do. I know you will understand. Do sit down!"

But Jeff remained squarely on his feet. "I hope you have quite recovered from your fall?" he said.

"Quite, thank you." She smiled faintly. "It seems such an age ago. Hector came home quite safely too." She broke off short, paused as if seeking for words, then said rather abruptly, "I shall never go hunting again."

"You mean not this year?" suggested Jeff.

She looked at him, and he saw that her smile was piteous. "No, I mean never. Everything is to be sold. Haven't you heard?"

He nodded. "Yes, I had heard. I hoped it wasn't true."

"Yes, it is true." Her two hands fastened very tightly upon the back of a chair. There was something indescribably pathetic in the action. She seemed on the verge of saying more, but in the end she did

not say it. She just stood looking at him with the wide grey eyes that tried so hard not to be tragic.

Jeff stood looking back with great sturdiness and not much apparent feeling. He offered no word of condolence or sympathy. Only after a very decided pause he said, "I wonder what you will do."

"I am going to London," she said.

"Soon?" Jeff's voice was curt, almost gruff.

"Yes, very soon." She hesitated momentarily, then went on rapidly, as if it were a relief to tell someone. "My father's life was insured. It has left my step-mother enough to live on; but, of course, not here. The place is mortgaged up to the hilt. I have nothing at all. I have got to make my own living."

"You?" said Jeff.

She smiled again faintly. "Yes, I. What is there in that? Lots of women work for their living."

"You are not going to work for yours," he said.

She thrust the chair from her with a quick little movement of the hands. "I would begin to-morrow—if I only knew how. But I don't—yet. I've got to look about me for a little. I am going first to a cousin at Kensington."

"Who doesn't want you," said Jeff.

She looked at him in sharp surprise. "Who—who told you that?"

"You did," he said doggedly. "At least, you told Mr. Chesyl—in my presence."

"Ah, I remember!" She uttered a tremulous little laugh. "That was the day I caught you eaves-dropping and ordered you off your own ground."

"It was," said Jeff. "I heard several things that

day, and I guessed—other things.” He paused, still looking straight at her. “Miss Elliot,” he said “wouldn’t it be easier for you to marry than to work for your living?”

The pretty brows went up in astonishment. “Oh!” she said, in quick confusion. “You heard that too?”

“Wouldn’t it be easier?” persisted Jeff in his slow stubborn way.

She shook her head swiftly and vehemently. “I shall never marry Mr. Chesyl,” she said with determination.

“Where is he?” asked Jeff.

The soft colour rose in her face at the question. She looked away from him for the first time. “I don’t quite know where he is. I believe he is up north some where—in Scotland.”

“He knows what has been happening here,” questioned Jeff.

She made a slight movement as of protest. “No doubt,” she said in a low voice.

Jeff’s square jaw hardened. Abruptly he thrust Chesyl out of the conversation. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “That isn’t what I came to talk about. May I tell you just what I have come for? Will you give me a patient hearing?”

She turned to him again in renewed surprise. “Of course,” she said.

His dark eyes were upon her. “It may not please you,” he said slowly, “though I ask you to believe that it is not my intention to give you offence.”

“But, of course, I know you would not,” she said.

Jeff’s fingers clenched upon his riding-switch. H

spoke with difficulty, but not without a certain native dignity that made him impressive. "I have come," he said, "just to say to you that if it is possible that no one in your own world is wanting you, I am wanting you. All that I have is absolutely at your disposal. I heard you say—that day—that you would like to be a farmer's wife. Well—if you really meant it—you have your opportunity."

"Mr. Ironside!" She was gazing at him in wide-eyed amazement.

A dark flush rose in his swarthy face under her eyes. "I had to say it," he said with heavy deliberation, "though I know I'm only hammering nails into my own coffin. I had to take my only chance of telling you. Of course, I know you won't listen. I'm not of your sort—respectable enough, but not quite—not quite——" He broke off grimly, and for an instant his teeth showed clenched upon his lower lip. "But if by any chance, when everything else has failed," resolutely he went on, "you could bring yourself to think of me—in that way, I shall always be ready, quite ready, for you. That's what I came to say."

He straightened himself upon the words, and made as if he would turn and leave her. But Doris was too quick for him. She moved like a flash. She came between him and the door. "Please—please," she said, "you mustn't go yet!"

He stopped instantly, and she stood before him, breathing quickly, her hand upon the door.

She did not speak again very quickly; she was plainly trying to master considerable agitation.

Jeff waited immovably with eyes unvaryingly upon

her. "I don't want to hurry you," he said at last. "I know, of course, what your answer will be. But can wait for it."

That faint, fugitive smile of hers went over her face. She took her hand from the door.

"You—you haven't been very—explicit, have you?" she said. "Are you—are you being just kind to me, Mr. Ironside, like—like Hugh Chesyl?"

Her voice quivered as she asked the question, but her eyes met his with direct steadfastness. He lowered his own very suddenly. "No," he said. "I wouldn't insult you by being kind. I shouldn't ask you to marry me if I didn't love you with all my heart and soul."

The words came quickly, with something of a burning quality. She made a slight movement as if she were taken by surprise.

After a moment she spoke. "There are two kinds of love," she said. "There's the big, unselfish kind—the real thing; and there's the other—the kind that demands everything, and even then, perhaps, is never satisfied. You hardly know me well enough to care for me in the first big way, do you? You don't even know if I'm worth it."

"I beg your pardon," said Jeff Ironside. "I think I do know you well enough for that. Anyhow, if you could bring yourself to marry me, I should be satisfied. The right to take care of you—make you comfortable—wait on you—that's all I'm asking. That would be enough for me—more than I've dared hope for."

"That would make you happy?" she asked.

He kept his eyes lowered. "It would be—enough," he repeated

She uttered a sudden quick sigh. "But wouldn't you rather marry a woman who was in love with you in just the ordinary way?" she said.

"No," said Jeff curtly.

"It would be much better for you," she protested.

He smiled a grim smile. "I am the best judge of that," he said.

She held out her hand to him. "Mr. Ironside, tell me honestly, wouldn't you despise me if I married you in that way—taking all and giving nothing?"

He crushed her hand in his. The red blood rose to his forehead. He looked at her for a moment—only a moment—and instantly looked away again.

"No," he said, "I shouldn't."

"I should despise myself," said Doris.

"I don't know why you should," he said.

She smiled again with lips that quivered. "No, you don't understand. You're too big for me altogether. I can't say 'Yes,' but I feel very highly honoured all the same. You'll believe that, won't you?"

"Why can't you say 'Yes'?" asked Jeff.

She hesitated momentarily. "You see, I'm afraid I don't care for you—like that," she said.

"Does that matter?" said Jeff.

She looked at him, her hand still in his. "Don't you think so?"

"No, I don't," he said, "unless you think you couldn't be happy."

"I was thinking of you," she said gently.

"Of me?" He looked surprised for an instant, and again his eyes met hers in a quick glance. "If you're going to think of me," he said, "you'll do it. I have told you, you needn't be afraid of my expecting too much."

But she shook her head. "I should be much more afraid of taking too much from you," she said. "The little I could offer would never satisfy you."

"Yes it would," he insisted. "I'm only asking to stand between you and trouble. It's all I want in life."

Again his eyes were upon her, dark and resolute. His hand held hers in a steady grip. For the first time her own resolution began to falter.

"Let me write to you, Mr. Ironside!" she said at last, with a vague idea of softening a refusal that had become inexplicably hard.

"Write and say 'No'?" said Jeff.

She smiled a little, but her eyes filled with sudden tears. "You make it very hard for me to say 'No,'" she said.

"I would like to make it impossible," he said.

"Even when I have told you that I can't—that I don't—love you in the ordinary way?" she said almost pleadingly.

"I don't want to be loved in the ordinary way," he answered doggedly.

"I should be a perpetual disappointment to you," she said.

"I would rather have even that than—nothing," said Jeff.

One of the tears ran over and fell upon their clasped hands. "In fact, you want me at any price," she said.

"At any price," said Jeff.

She bent her head and choked back a sob. "And no one else wants me at all," she whispered.

He stooped towards her. Perhaps for her peace of mind it was as well that she did not see the sudden fire that blazed in his deep-set eyes as he did so.

"So you'll change your mind," he said after a moment to the bowed head. "You'll have me—you will?"

She caught back another sob and said nothing.

He straightened himself sharply. "Miss Elliot, if it's going to make you miserable, you had better send me away. I'll go—if it's for that."

He would have released her hand, but it tightened very suddenly upon his. "No, don't go—don't go!" she said.

"But you're crying," muttered Jeff uneasily.

She gave a big gulp and raised her head. The tears were running down her cheeks, but she smiled at him bravely notwithstanding. "I believe I should cry—much more—if you were to go now," she told him, with a quaint effort at humour.

Jeff Ironside put a strong grip upon himself. His heart was thumping like the strokes of a heavy hammer. "Then you'll have me?" he said.

She put her other hand with a very winning gesture of confidence into his. "I don't see how I can help it," she said. "You've knocked down all my obstacles. But you do understand, don't you? You won't—won't——"

"Abuse your trust? No, never!" said Jeff Ironside. "I will die by my own hand sooner."

"Ah, I can't help liking you," Doris said impulsively, as if in explanation or excuse. "You're so big."

"Thank you," Jeff said very earnestly. "And you won't cry any more?"

She uttered a whimsical little laugh. "But I wasn't crying for myself," she said as she dried her eyes. "I was crying for you."

"Well, you mustn't," said Jeff. "You have given me all I want—much more than I dared to hope for." He paused a moment, then abruptly, "You won't think better of it when I'm gone, will you?" he said. "You won't write and say you have changed your mind?"

She gave him her hand again with an air of comradeship. "It's a bargain, Mr. Ironside," she said, with gentle dignity. "A very one-sided one, I fear, but still—a bargain."

"I beg your pardon," murmured Jeff.

CHAPTER VI

THE WEDDING PRESENT

THE marriage of Jeff Ironside to Colonel Elliot's daughter created a sensation in the neighbourhood even greater than that which followed the Colonel's death. But the ceremony itself was strictly private. It took place so quietly and so suddenly very early on a misty October morning that it was over before most people knew anything about it. Jim Dawlish knew and was present with old Granny Grimshaw.

but, save for the family lawyer who gave away the bride and the aged rector who married them, no one else was in the secret.

Mrs. Elliot knew, but she and her stepdaughter had never been in sympathy, and she had already left the place and gone to town.

Very small and pathetic looked the bride in her deep mourning on that dim autumn morning, but she played her part with queenly dignity, unfaltering, undismayed. If she had acted upon impulse she was fully prepared to face the consequences.

As for Jeff, he was gruff almost to rudeness, so desperate was the turmoil of his soul. Not one word did he address to his bride from the moment of entering the church to that of leaving it save such as were contained in the marriage service. And even when they passed out together into the grey churchyard he remained grimly silent till she turned with a little smile and addressed him.

"Good morning, Jeff!" she said, and her slender, ungloved hand, very cold but superbly confident, found its way into his.

He looked down at her then and found his voice, the while his fingers closed protectingly upon hers. "You're cold," he said. "They ought to have warmed the church."

She turned her face up to the sky. "The sun will be through soon. Will you take me home across the fields?"

"Too wet," said Jeff.

"Not if we keep to the path," she said. "I must just say good-bye to Mr Webster first."

She looked down at the brown hand she held all roughened and hardened by toil, and hesitated.

"Well?" said Jeff.

She turned her eyes upon his face. "Are you going back to work to-day, just as if—as if nothing had happened?" she asked.

He looked straight back at her. "You don't want me, do you?" he said.

She nodded. "Shall we go for a picnic?" she said.

"A picnic!" He seemed surprised at the suggestion.

She laughed a little. "Do you never go for picnics? I do—all by myself sometimes. It's rather fun, you know."

"By yourself?" said Jeff.

She rose from her perch. "It's more fun with someone certainly," she said.

Jeff's face reflected her smile for an instant. "All right," he said. "I'll take a holiday for once. But come home now and have some breakfast!"

She stepped down beside him. "It's nice of you to give me the very first thing I ask for," she said. "Will you do something else for me?"

"Yes," said Jeff.

"Then will you call me Dot?" she said. "It was the pet name my mother gave me. No one has used it since she died."

"Dot," repeated Jeff. "You really want me to call you that?"

"But, of course," she said, smiling, "you haven't called me anything yet. Please begin at once! It really isn't difficult."

Mr. Webster was the family lawyer. He came up with stilted phrases of felicitation which sent Jeff instantly back into his impenetrable shell of silence. Doris made reply on his behalf and her own with a dainty graciousness that covered all difficulties, and finally extricated herself and Jeff from the situation with a dexterity that left him spellbound.

She had her way. They went by way of the fields, he and she alone through the lifting mist while Granny Grimshaw and Jim Dawlish marched solemnly back to the mill by the road.

"It's a very good morning's work," asserted Granny Grimshaw with much satisfaction. "I always felt that Master Jeff would never marry any but a lady."

"I'd rather him than me," returned Jim Dawlish obscurely.

Which remark Granny Grimshaw treated as unworthy of notice.

As Jeff Ironside and his bride neared the last stile the sun came through and shone upon all things.

"I'm glad we came this way," she said.

Jeff said nothing. He never spoke unless he had something to say.

They reached the stile. He strode over and reached back a hand to her. She took it, mounted and stepped over, then sat down unexpectedly on the top bar with the hand in hers.

"Jeff!" she said.

He looked up at her. Her voice was small and shy, her cheeks very delicately flushed.

"What is it?" said Jeff.

"Very well, Dot," he said. "And where are we going for our picnic?"

"Oh, not very far," she said. "Somewhere within a quite easy walk."

"Can't we ride?" suggested Jeff.

"Ride?" She looked at him in surprise.

"I have a horse who would carry you," he said.

"Have you—have you, really?" Quick pleasure came into her eyes. "Oh, Jeff, how kind of you!"

"No, it isn't," said Jeff bluntly. "I want you to be happy."

She laughed her quick, light laugh. "So you're going to spoil me?" she said.

They reached the pretty millhouse above the stream and found breakfast awaiting them in the oak-panelled parlour that overlooked a sunny orchard.

"How absolutely sweet!" said Doris.

He came and stood beside her at the window, looking silently forth.

She glanced at him half-shyly. "Aren't you very fond of it all?"

"Yes," he said.

"And I think I am going to be," said Doris.

"I hope you will," said Jeff.

She turned from him to Granny Grimshaw who entered at the moment with a hot dish.

"I don't think we ought to have been married so early," she said. "You must be quite tired out. Now, please, Mrs. Grimshaw, do sit down and let me wait on you for a change!"

Granny Grimshaw smiled at the bare suggestion

"No, no, Mrs. Ironside, my dear. This is for you and Master Jeff. I've got mine in the kitchen."

"I never heard such a thing!" declared Doris
"Jeff, surely you are not going to allow that!"

Jeff came from the window. "Of course you must join us, Granny," he said.

But Granny Grimshaw was obdurate on that point. "My place is in the kitchen," she said firmly. "And there I must bide. But I am ready to show you the way to your room, my dear, whenever you want to go."

Doris bent forward impulsively and kissed her. "You are much, much too kind to me, you and Jeff," she said.

But as soon as she was alone with Jeff her shyness returned. She could not feel as much at ease with him in the house as in the open air. She did not admit it even to herself, but deep in her heart she had begun to be a little afraid.

Till then she had gone blindly forward, taking in desperation the only course that seemed to offer her escape from a position that had become wholly intolerable. But now for the first time misgivings arose within her. She remembered how slight was her knowledge of the man to whom she had thus impetuously entrusted her future; and remembering, something of her ready confidence went from her. She fell silent also.

"You are not eating anything," said Jeff. She started at his voice and looked up.

"No, I'm not hungry," she said. "I shall eat all the more presently when we get out into the open."

He said no more, but finished his own breakfast with businesslike promptitude.

"Mrs. Grimshaw will take you upstairs," he said then, and went to the door to call her.

"Where will you be?" Doris asked him shyly, as he stood back for her to pass.

"I am going round to the stable," he said.

"May I come to you there?" she suggested.

He assented gravely: "Do!"

Granny Grimshaw was in her most garrulous mood. She took Doris up the old steep stairs and into the low-ceiled room with the lattice windows that looked over the river meadows.

"It's the best room in the house," she told her. "Master Jeff was born in it, and he's slept here for the past ten years. You won't be lonely, my dear. My room is just across the passage, and he has gone to the room at the end which he always had as a boy."

"This is a lovely room," said Doris.

She stood where Jeff had stood before the open window and looked across the valley.

"I hope you will be very happy here, my dear," said Granny Grimshaw behind her.

Doris turned round to her impetuously. "Dear Mrs. Grimshaw, I don't like Jeff to give up the best room to me," she said. "Isn't there another one that I could have?"

She glanced towards a door that led out of the room in which they were.

"Yes, go in, my dear!" said Granny Grimshaw with a chuckle. "It's all for you."

Doris opened the door with a quick flush on her cheeks.

"Master Jeff thought you would like a little sitting-room of your own," said the old woman behind her.

"Oh, he shouldn't! He shouldn't!" Doris said.

She stood on the threshold of a sunny room that overlooked the garden with its hedge of lavender, and beyond it the orchard with its wealth of ripe apples shining in the sun. The room had been evidently furnished for her especial use. There was a couch in one corner, a cottage piano in another, and a writing-table near the window.

"The old master bought those things for his bride," said Granny Grimshaw. "They are just as good as new yet, and Master Jeff has had the piano put in order for you. I expect you know how to play the piano, my dear?"

Doris went forward into the room. The tears were not far from her eyes. "He is too good to me. He is much too good," she said.

"Ah, my dear, and you'll be good to him too, won't you?" said Granny Grimshaw coaxingly.

"I'll do my best," said Doris quietly.

She went down to Jeff in the stable-yard a little later with a heart brimming with gratitude, but that strange new shyness was with her also. She did not know how to give him her thanks.

He was waiting for her, and escorted her across to the stable. "You will like to see your mount," he said, cutting her short almost before she had begun.

She followed him into the stable. Jeff's own mare poked an enquiring nose over the door of her loose-box. Doris stopped to fondle her. Jeff plunged a hand into his pocket and brought out some sugar.

From the stall next to them came a low whinn. Doris, in the act of feeding the mare, looked sharply. The next moment with a little cry she had sprung forward and was in the stall with her arm around the neck of its occupant—a big bay, who nozzled against her shoulder with evident pleasure.

"Oh, Hector! Hector!" she cried. "How ever did you come here?"

"I bought him," said Jeff, "as a wedding present

"For me? Oh, Jeff!" She left Hector and came to him with both hands outstretched. "Oh, Jeff, don't know how to thank you. You are so much to good. What can I say?"

He took the hands and gripped them. His dark eyes looked straight and hard into hers, and a little tremor went through her. She lowered her own instinctively, and in the same instant he let her go. He did not utter a word, and she turned from him in silence with a face on fire.

She made no further effort to express her gratitude.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF THE PICNIC

THOSE odd silences of Jeff's fell very often throughout the day, and they lay upon Doris's spirit like a physical weight. They rode through autumn woodlands, and picnicked on the side of a hill. The day was warm and sunny, and the whole world shone as through a pearly veil. There were blackberries in abundance, large and ripe, and Doris wandered about

picking them during the afternoon while Jeff lounged against a tree and smoked.

He did not offer to join her, but she had a feeling that his eyes followed her wherever she went, and a great restlessness kept her moving. She could not feel at her ease in his vicinity. She wanted very urgently to secure his friendship. She had counted upon that day in his society to do so. But it seemed to be his resolve to hold aloof. He seemed disinclined to commit himself to anything approaching intimacy, and that attitude of his filled her with misgiving. Had he begun to repent of the one-sided bargain she asked herself? Or could it be that he also was oppressed by shyness? She longed intensely to know.

The sun was sinking low in the sky when at length reluctantly she went back to him. "It's getting late," she said. "Don't you think we ought to go home?"

He was standing in the level sun-rays gazing sombrely down into the valley from which already the mists were beginning to rise.

He turned at her voice, and she knew he looked at her, though she did not meet his eyes. For a moment or two he stood, not speaking, but as though on the verge of speech; and her heart quickened to a nervous throbbing.

Then unexpectedly he turned upon his heel. "Yes. Wait here, won't you, while I go and fetch the animals?"

He went, and a sharp sense of relief shot through her. She was sure that he had something on his mind; but, inexplicably she was thankful that he had not uttered it.

The sun was dropping out of sight behind the opposite hill, and she was conscious of a growing chill in the atmosphere. A cockchafer whirred past her and buried itself in a tuft of grass hard by. In the wood behind her a robin trilled a high sweet song. From the further side of the valley came a trail of smoke from a cottage bonfire, and the scent of it hung heavy in the evening air.

All these things she knew and loved, and they were to be hers for the rest of her life; yet her heart was heavy within her. She turned and looked after Jeff with a wistful drooping of the lips.

He had passed out of sight behind some trees, but as she turned she heard a footfall in the wood close at hand, and almost simultaneously a man emerged carrying a gun.

He stopped at sight of her, and on the instant Doris made a swift movement of recognition.

"Why, Hugh!" she said.

He came straight to her, with hand outstretched. "My dear, dear girl!" he said.

Her hand lay in his, held in a clasp such as Hugh Chesyl had never before given her, and then all in a moment she withdrew it.

"Why, where have you come from?" she said, with a little nervous laugh.

His eyes looked straight down to hers. "I've been yachting," he said, "along Argyll and Skye. I didn't know till the day before yesterday about the poor old Colonel. I came straight back directly I knew, got here this morning, but heard that you had gone to town. I was going to follow you straightway, but

the squire wouldn't hear of it. You know what he is. So I had to compromise and spend one night with him. By Jove! it's a bit of luck finding you here. I'm pleased, Doris, jolly pleased. I've been worried to death about you—never moved so fast in my life."

"Haven't you?" said Doris; she was still smiling a small, tired smile. "But why? I don't see."

"Don't you?" said Hugh. "How shall I explain? You have got such a rooted impression of me as a racker that I am half afraid of taking your breath away."

She laughed again, not very steadily. "Oh, are you turning over a new leaf? I am delighted to hear it."

He smiled also, his eyes upon hers. "Well, I am, a way. It's come to me lately that I've been an utter ass all this time. I expect you've been thinking the same, haven't you?"

"No, I don't think so," said Doris.

"Not? That's nice of you," said Hugh. "But it's the truth nevertheless. I haven't studied the art of expressing myself properly. I can't do it even yet. It occurred to me—it just occurred to me—that perhaps I'd never succeeded in making you understand how awfully badly I want to marry you. I think I never told you so. I always somehow took it for granted that you knew. But now—especially now, Doris, when you're in trouble—I want you more than ever. Even if you can't love me as I love you——"

He stopped, for she had flung out her hands with an almost agonized gesture, and her eyes implored him though she spoke no word.

"Won't you listen to me just this once—just this once?" he pleaded. "My dear, I love you so. I love you enough for both if you'll only marry me, and give me the chance of making you happy."

An unwonted note of feeling sounded in his voice. He stretched out his hand to her.

"Doris, darling, won't you change your mind? I'm miserable without you."

And then very suddenly Doris found her voice. She spoke with breathless entreaty. "Hugh, don't—don't! I can't listen to you. I married Jeff Ironside this morning."

His hand fell. He stared at her as if he thought her mad. "You—married Jeff Ironside! I don't believe it!"

She clenched her hands tightly to still her agitation. "But it's true," she said.

"Doris!" he said.

She nodded vehemently, keeping her eyes on his. "It's true," she said again.

He straightened himself up with the instinctive movement of a man bracing himself to meet a sudden strain. "But why? How? I didn't even know you knew the man."

She nodded again. "He helped me once when I was out cubbing, and I went to his house. After that—when he heard that I had nothing to live on—he came and asked me if I would marry him. And I was very miserable because nobody wanted me. So I said 'Yes.'"

Her voice sank. Her lips were quivering. "I wanted you," Hugh said.

She was silent.

He bent slowly towards her, looking into her eyes. "My dear, didn't you really know—didn't you understand?"

She shook her head; her eyes were suddenly full of tears. "No, Hugh."

He held out his hand again and took hers. "Don't cry, Doris! You haven't lost much. I shall get over it somehow. I know you never cared for me."

She bent her head with some murmured words he could not catch.

He leaned nearer. "What, dear, what? You never did, did you?"

He waited for her answer, and at last through tears it came. "I've been struggling so hard, so hard, to keep myself from caring."

He was silent a moment, and again it was as if he were collecting his strength for that which had to be endured. Then slowly: "You thought I wasn't in earnest?" he said. "You thought I didn't care enough?"

She did not answer him in words; her silence was enough.

"God forgive me!" whispered Hugh. . . .

There came the thud of horses' hoofs upon the grass, and his hand relinquished hers. He turned to see Jeff Ironside barely ten paces away, leading the two animals. Very pale but wholly collected, Hugh moved to meet him.

"I have just been learning about your marriage Ironside," he said. "May I congratulate you?"

Jeff's eyes, with the red sunlight turning them to a

ruddy brown, met his with absolute directness as he made brief response. "You are very kind."

"Doris and I are old friends," said Hugh.

"Yes, I know," said Jeff.

Spasmodically Doris turned and joined the two men. "We hope Mr. Chesyl will come and see us sometimes, don't we, Jeff?" she said.

"Certainly," said Jeff, "when he has nothing better to do."

She turned to Hugh with a bright little smile. Her tears were wholly gone, and he marvelled. "I hope that will be often, Hugh," she said.

"Thank you," Hugh said gravely. "Thank you very much." He added, after a moment, to Jeff: "I shall probably be down here a good deal now. The squire is beginning to feel his age. In fact, he wants me to make my home with him. I don't propose to do that entirely, but I can't leave him alone for long at a time."

"I see," said Jeff. He glanced towards Doris. "Shall we start back?" he said.

Hugh propped his gun against a tree, and stepped forward to mount her, "So you still have Hector," he said.

"Jeff's wedding present," she answered, still smiling.

Lightly she mounted, and for a single moment he felt her passing touch upon his shoulder. The Hector moved away, stepping proudly. Jeff was already in the saddle.

"Good-bye!" said Doris, looking back to him. "Don't forget to come and see us!"

She was gone.

Hugh Chesyl turned with the sun-rays dazzling him, and groped for his gun.

He found it, shouldered it, and strode away down the woodland path. His face as he went was the face of a man suddenly awakened to the stress and the turmoil of life.

CHAPTER VIII

THE NEW LIFE

THERE was no doubt about it. Granny Grimshaw was not satisfied. Deeper furrows were beginning to appear in her already deeply furrowed face. She shook her head very often with pursed lips when she was alone. And this despite the fact that she and the young mistress of the Mill House were always upon excellent terms. No difficulties ever arose between them. Doris showed not the smallest disposition to usurp the old housekeeper's authority. Possibly Granny Grimshaw would have been better pleased if she had. She spent much of her time out of doors, and when in the house she was generally to be found in the little sitting-room that Jeff had fitted up for her.

She had her meals in the parlour with Jeff, and these were the sole occasions on which they were alone together. If Doris could have had her way, Granny Grimshaw would have been present at these also, but at this point the old woman showed herself determined, not to say obstinate. She maintained that her place was the kitchen, and that her presence was

absolutely necessary there, a point of view which no argument of Doris's could persuade her to relinquish.

So she and Jeff breakfasted, dined, and supped in solitude, and though Doris became gradually accustomed to these somewhat silent meals, she never enjoyed them. Of difficult moments there were actually very few. They mutually avoided any but the most general subjects for conversation. But of intimacy between them there was none. Jeff had apparently drawn a very distinct boundary-line which he never permitted himself to cross. He never intruded upon her. He never encroached upon the friendship she shyly proffered. Once when she somewhat hesitatingly suggested that he should come to her sitting-room for a little after supper he refused, not churlishly, but very decidedly.

"I like to have my pipe and go to bed," he said.

"But you can bring your pipe, too," she said.

"No, thanks," said Jeff. "I always smoke in the kitchen or on the step."

She said no more, but went up to her room, and presently Jeff, moodily puffing at his briar in the porch, heard the notes of her piano overhead. She played softly for some little time, and Jeff's pipe went out before it was finished—a most rare occurrence with him.

Only when the piano ceased did he awake to the fact, and then half-savagely he knocked out its half-consumed contents and turned inwards.

He found Granny Grimshaw standing in the passage in a listening attitude, and paused to bid her good-night.

"Be you going to bed, Master Jeff?" she said. "My dear, did you ever hear the like? She plays like an angel."

He smiled somewhat grimly, without replying.

The old woman came very close to him. "Master Jeff, why don't you go and make love to her? Don't you know she's waiting for you?"

"Is she?" said Jeff, but he said it in the tone of one who does not require an answer, and with the words very abruptly he passed her by.

Granny Grimshaw shook her head and sighed, "Ah, dear!" after his retreating form.

It was a few days after this that a letter came for Doris one morning bearing the Squire's crest. Her husband handed it to her at the breakfast-table, and she received it with a flush. After a moment, seeing him occupied with a newspaper, she opened it.

"DEAR DORIS" (it said),

"You asked me to come and see you, but I have not done so as I was not sure if, after all, you meant me to take the invitation literally. We have been friends for so long that I feel constrained to speak openly. For myself, I only ask to go on being your friend, and to serve you in any way possible. But perhaps I can serve you best by keeping away from you. If so, then I will do even that.

"Yours ever,

"HUGH."

Something within moved Doris to raise her eyes suddenly, and instantly she encountered Jeff's fixed

upon her. The flush in her cheeks deepened burningly. With an effort she spoke.

"Hugh Chesyl wants to know if he may come to see us."

"I thought you asked him," said Jeff.

A little quiver of resentment went through her; she could not have said wherefore. "He was not sure if I meant it," she said.

There was an instant's silence; then Jeff did an extraordinary thing. He stretched out his hand across the table, keeping his eyes on hers.

"Let me have his letter to answer!" he said.

She made a sharp instinctive movement of withdrawal. "Oh, no!" she said. "No!"

Jeff said nothing; but his face hardened somewhat, and his hand remained outstretched.

Doris's grey eyes gleamed. "No, Jeff!" she repeated, more calmly, and with the words she slipped Hugh's envelope into the bosom of her dress. "I can't give you my letters to answer indeed."

Jeff withdrew his hand, and began to eat his breakfast in utter silence.

Doris played with hers until the silence became intolerable, and then, very suddenly and very winningly, she leaned towards him.

"Dear Jeff, surely you are not vexed!" she said.

He looked at her again, and in spite of herself she felt her heart quicken.

"Are you, Jeff?" she said, and held out her hand to him.

For a moment he sat motionless, then abruptly he

grasped the hand. "May I say what I think?" he asked her bluntly.

"Of course," she said.

"Then I think from all points of view that you had better leave Chesyl alone," he said.

"What do you mean?" Quickly she asked the question; the colour flamed in her face once more.

"Tell me why you think that!" she said.

"I would rather not," said Jeff.

"But that is not fair of you, Jeff," she protested.

He released her hand slowly. "I am sorry," he said. "If I were more to you, I would say more. As it is—well, I would rather not."

She rose impetuously. "You are very—difficult," she said.

To which he made answer with that silence which was to her more difficult than speech.

Yet later, when she was alone, her sense of justice made her admit that he had not been altogether unreasonable. She recalled the fact that he had overheard that leisurely proposal of marriage that Hugh had made her in the cornfield on the occasion of their first meeting, and her face burned afresh as she remembered certain other items of that same conversation that he must also have overheard. No, on the whole it was not surprising that he did not greatly care for Hugh—poor Hugh, who loved her and had so narrowly missed winning her for himself. She wondered if Hugh were really very miserable. She herself had passed through so many stages of misery since her wedding-day. But she had sufficient know-

ledge of herself to realize that it was the loneliness and lack of sympathy that weighed upon her most.

Her feeling for Hugh was still an undeveloped quantity, though the certainty of his love for her had quickened it to keener life. She was not even yet absolutely certain that he could have satisfied her. It was true that he had been deeply stirred for the moment but how deeply and how lasting she had no means of gauging. Knowing the indolence of his nature, she was inclined to mistrust the permanence of his feeling. And so resolutely had she restrained her own feeling for him during the whole length of their acquaintance that she was able still to keep it within bounds. She knew that the sympathy between them was fundamental in character, but she had often suspected—in her calmer moments she suspected still—that it was of the kind that engenders friendship rather than passion.

But even so, his friendship was essentially precious to her, all the more so for the daily loneliness of spirit that she found herself compelled to endure. For—with this one exception—she was practically friendless. She had known that in marrying Jeff Ironside she was relinquishing her own circle entirely. But she had imagined that there would be compensations. Moreover, so far as society was concerned, she had not had any choice. It had been this or exile. And she had chosen this.

Wherefore? Simply and solely because Jeff, of all she knew, had wanted her.

Again that curious little tremor went through her. Had he wanted her so very badly after all? Not once since their wedding-day had he made any

friendly overture or responded to any overture of hers. They were as completely strangers now as they had been on the day he had proposed to her.

A sharp little sigh came from her. She had not thought somehow that Jeff would be so difficult. He had told her that he loved her. She had counted on that for the foundation of their friendship, but no structure had she succeeded in raising thereon. He asked nothing of her, and, save for material comforts, he bestowed nothing in return. True, it was what she had bargained for. But yet it did not satisfy her. She was not at her ease with him, and she began to think she never would be.

As to Hugh, she hardly knew how to proceed; but she finally wrote him a friendly note, concurring with his suggestion that they should not meet again for a little while—"only for a little while, Hugh," she added, almost in spite of herself, "for I can't afford to lose a friend like you."

And she did not guess how the heart-cry of her loneliness echoed through the words.

CHAPTER IX

THE WAY TO BE HAPPY

It was not until the week before Christmas that Doris saw Hugh again. They met in the hunting-field. It was the first hunt she had attended since her marriage, and she went to it alone.

The meet was some distance away, and she arrived after the start, joining the ranks of the riders as they waited outside a copse which the hounds were drawing.

The day was chill and grey. She did not altogether know why she went, save that the loneliness at the Mill House seemed to become daily harder to bear, and the longing to escape it, if only for a few hours, was not to be denied.

She was scarcely in a sporting mood, and the sight of old acquaintances, though they greeted her kindly enough, did not tend to raise her spirits.

The terrible conviction had begun to grow upon her of late that she had committed a great mistake that no effort of hers could ever remedy, and the thought of it weighed her down perpetually night and day.

But the sight of Hugh as he came to her along the edge of the wood was a welcome one. She greeted him almost with eagerness, and the friendly grasp of his hand sent warmth to her lonely young heart.

"I am very glad to see you following the hounds," Hugh said. "Are you alone?"

"Quite alone," she said, feeling a lump rise in her throat.

"Then you'll let me take care of you," he said, with a friendly smile.

And she could but smile and thank him.

It was not a particularly satisfactory day from a fox-hunting point of view. The weather did not improve, and the scent was misleading. They found and lost, found and lost again, and a cold drizzle setting in with the afternoon effectually cooled the ardour of even the most enthusiastic.

Yet Doris enjoyed herself. She and Hugh ate their lunch together under some dripping trees, and they

managed to make merry over it in spite of the fact that both were fairly wet through. He made her share the sherry in his flask, laughing down all protests, treating her with the absolute ease that had always characterized their friendship. It was such a day as Doris had often spent in his company, and the return to the old genial atmosphere was like the sweetness of a spring day in the midst of winter.

It was he who at length suggested the advisability of returning home. "I'm sure you ought to get back and change," he said. "It'll be getting dark in another hour."

Her face fell. "I have enjoyed it," she said regretfully.

"You'll come again," said Hugh. "They are meeting at Kendal's Corner on Christmas Eve. I shall look out for you."

She smiled. "Very well, I'll be there. Thank you for giving me such a good time, Hugh."

"My dear girl!" said Hugh.

They rode together through a driving drizzle, and, as Hugh had predicted, the early dusk had fallen before they reached the mill. The roar of the water sounded indescribably desolate as they drew near, and Doris gave a sharp, involuntary shiver.

It was then that Hugh drew close to her and stretched out a hand in the growing darkness. "Doris!" he said softly.

She put her own into it swiftly, impulsively. "Oh, Hugh!" she said with a sob.

"Don't!" said Hugh gently. "Stick to it, dear!

I think you won't be sorry in the end. I believe he's a good chap. Give him all you can! It's the only way to be happy."

Her fingers tightened convulsively upon his. She spoke no word.

"Don't, dear!" he said again very earnestly. "It's such a mistake. Honestly, I don't think you've anything to be sorry for. So don't let yourself be faint-hearted! I know he's not a bad sort."

"He's very good," whispered Doris.

"Yes, that's just it," said Hugh. "So don't be afraid of giving! You'll never regret it. No one could help loving you, Doris. Remember that, dear, when you're feeling down! You're just the sweetest woman in the world, and the man who couldn't worship you would be a hopeless fool."

They were passing over the bridge that spanned the stream. The road was narrow, and their horses moved side by side. They went over it with hands locked.

They were nearing the house when Doris reined in. "Good-bye, dear Hugh!" she said. "You're the truest friend any woman ever had."

He reined in also. They stood in the deep shadow of some trees close to the gate that led into the Mill House garden. The roar of the water was all about them. They seemed to be isolated from all the world. And so Hugh Chesyl, being moved beyond his went, lifted the hand that lay so confidently in his, and kissed it with all reverence.

"I want you to be happy," he said.

A moment later they parted without further words

on either side, he to retrace his steps across the bridge, she to turn wearily in at the iron gate under the dripping trees that led to the Mill House porch.

She heard a man's step in front of her as she went, and at the porch she found her husband.

"Oh, Jeff!" she said, slightly startled. "I didn't know it was you!"

"I've been looking out for you for some time," he said. "You must be very wet."

"Yes, it's rained nearly all day, hasn't it? We didn't have much sport, but I enjoyed it." Doris slid down into the hands he held up to her. "Why, you are wet too," she said. "H hadn't you better change?"

"I'll take the horse round first," he said. "Won't you go in?"

She went in with a feeling of deep depression. Jeff's armour of reserve seemed impenetrable. With lagging feet she climbed the stairs and entered her sitting-room.

A bright fire was burning there, and the lamp was alight. A little thrill of purely physical pleasure went through her at the sight. She paused to take off her hat, then went forward and stooped to warm her hands at the blaze.

She was certainly very tired. The arm-chair by the hearth was invitingly near. She sank into it with a sigh and closed her eyes.

It must have been ten minutes later that the door, which she had left ajar, was pushed open, and Jeff stood on the threshold.

He was carrying a steaming cup of milk. A moment he paused as if on the verge of asking admit-

tance; then as his eyes fell upon the slight young figure sunk in the chair, he closed his lips and came forward in silence.

A few seconds later Doris opened her eyes with a start at the touch of his hand on her shoulder. She sat up sharply. "Oh, Jeff, how you startled me!"

It was the first time she had ever seen him in her little sitting-room, though she had more than once invited him thither. His presence at that moment was for some reason peculiarly disconcerting.

"I am sorry," he said, in his slow way. "The door was half-open, and I saw you were asleep. I don't think you are wise to sit down in your wet clothes. I have brought you some milk and brandy."

"Oh, but I never take brandy," she said, collecting herself with a little smile and rising. "It's very kind of you, Jeff. But I can't drink it, really. It would go straight to my head."

"You must drink it," said Jeff.

He presented it to her with the words, but Doris backed away half-laughing.

"No, really, Jeff! I'll go and have a hot bath. That will do quite as well."

"You must drink this first," said Jeff.

There was a dogged note in his voice, and at sound of it Doris's brows went up, and her smile passed.

"I mean it," said Jeff, setting cup and saucer on the table before her. "I can't run the risk of having you laid up. Drink it now, before it gets cold!"

A little gleam of mutiny shone in Doris's eyes. "My dear Jeff," she said, very decidedly, "I have told you already that I do not drink brandy. I am going to

have a hot bath and change, and after that I will have some tea. But I draw the line at hot grog. So, please, take it away! Give it to Granny Grimshaw! It would do her more good."

She smiled again suddenly and winningly with the words. After all it was absurd to be vexed over such a trifle.

But to her amazement, Jeff's face hardened. He stepped to her, and, as if she had been a child, took her by the shoulders, and put her down into a chair by the table.

"Doris," he said, and his voice sounded deep and stern above her head, "I may not get much out of my bargain, but I think I may claim obedience at least. There is not enough brandy there to hurt you, and I wish you to take it."

She stiffened at his action, as if she would actively resist; but she only became rigid under his hands.

There followed a tense and painful silence. Then without a word Doris took the cup and raised it unsteadily to her lips. In the same moment Jeff took his hands from her shoulders, straightened himself, and in silence left the room.

CHAPTER X

CHRISTMAS EVE

It was only a small episode, but it made an impression upon Doris that she was slow to forget. It was not that she resented the assertion of authority. She had the fairness to admit his right, but in a very

subtle fashion it hurt her. It made her feel more than ever the hollowness of the bargain, to which he had made such grim allusion. It added, moreover, to her uneasiness, making her suspect that he was fully as dissatisfied as she. Yet, in face of the stony front he presented she could not continue to proffer her friendship. He seemed to have no use for it. He seemed, in fact, to avoid her, and the old shyness that had oppressed her in the beginning returned upon her fourfold. She admitted to herself that she was becoming afraid of the man. The very sound of his voice made her heart beat thick and hard, and each succeeding day witnessed a diminishing of her confidence.

Under these circumstances she withdrew more and more into her solitude, and it was with something like dismay that she received the news from Granny Grimshaw at the beginning of Christmas week that it was Jeff's custom to entertain two or three of his farmer friends at supper on Christmas Eve.

"Only the menkind, my dear," said Granny Grimshaw consolingly. "And they're easy enough to amuse, as all the world knows. Give 'em a good feed, and they won't give any trouble! It's quite a job to get ready for 'em, that it is, but it's the only bit of entertaining he does all the year round, so I don't grudge it."

"You must let me help you," Doris said.

And help she did, protest notwithstanding, so that Jeff, returning from his work in the middle of the day, was surprised to find her flushed and animated in the kitchen, clad in one of Granny Grimshaw's aprons,

rolling out pastry with the ready deftness of a practised pastry-cook.

There was no dismay in her greeting of him, and only she knew of that sudden quickening of the heart that invariably followed his appearance.

"You didn't tell me about your Christmas party, Jeff," she said. "Granny and I are going to give you a big spread. I hope you will invite me to the feast."

Jeff's dark face flushed a little as he made reply. "I'm afraid you wouldn't enjoy it much."

"But you haven't introduced me to any of your friends yet," she protested. "I should like to meet them."

"I'm not so sure of that," said Jeff.

She looked up at him for a moment. "Don't you think that's rather a mistake?" she said.

"Why?" said Jeff.

With something of an effort she explained. "To take it for granted that I shall look down on them. I don't want to look down on them, Jeff."

"It isn't that," said Jeff curtly. "But they're not your sort. They don't talk your language. I'm not sure that I want you to meet them."

"But you can't keep me away from everyone, can you?" she said gently.

He did not answer her, and she returned to her pastry-making in silence.

But evidently her words had made some impression, for that evening when she rose from the supper-table to bid him a formal good-night, he very abruptly reverted to the subject.

"If you really think you can stand the racket on Christmas Eve, I hope you will join the party. There will only be four or five besides myself. I have never invited the women-kind."

"Perhaps by next Christmas I shall have got to know them a little," said Doris, "and then we can invite them too. Thank you for asking me, Jeff. I'll come."

But yet she viewed the prospect with considerable misgiving, and would have thankfully foregone the ordeal, if she had not felt constrained to face it.

The preparations went forward under Granny Grimshaw's guidance without a hitch, but they were kept busy up to the last moment, and on the day before Christmas Eve Doris scribbled a hasty note to Hugh Chesyl, excusing herself from attending the meet.

It was the only thing to be done, for she could not let him expect her in vain, but she regretted it later when at the breakfast-table the following day her husband silently handed to her Hugh's reply.

Hugh had written to convey his good wishes for Christmas, and this she explained to Jeff; but he received her explanation in utter silence, and she forthwith abandoned the subject. A smouldering resentment began to burn within her. What right had he to treat Hugh's friendship with her as a thing to be ashamed of? She longed to ask him, but would not risk an open rupture. She knew that if she gave her indignation rein she would not be able to control it.

So the matter passed, and she slipped Hugh's note into her bosom with a sense of outraged pride that went with her throughout the day. It was still present with her like an evil spirit when she went to her room to dress.

She had not much time at her disposal, and she slipped into her black evening gown with a passing wonder as to how Jeff's friends would be attired. Descending again, she found Jim Dawlish fixing a piece of mistletoe over the parlour door, and smiled at his occupation.

He smiled at her in a fashion that sent the blood suddenly and hotly to her face, and she passed on to the kitchen, erect and quivering with anger.

"Lor', my dearie, what a pretty picture you be, to be sure!" was Granny Grimshaw's greeting, and again a tremor of misgiving went through the girl's heart. Had she made herself too pretty for the occasion?

She mustered spirit, however, to laugh at the compliment, and busied herself with the final arrangements.

Jeff appeared a few minutes later, clad in black but not in evening dress. His eyes dwelt upon his wife for a moment or two before he addressed her.

"Do you mind being in the parlour when they come in?"

She looked up at him with a smile which she knew to be forced. "Are you sure I shan't be one too many, Jeff?"

"Quite," said Jeff.

There was no appealing against that, and she accompanied him without further words.

Jim Dawlish was standing by the parlour door.

admiring his handiwork. He nudged Jeff as he went by, and was rewarded by Jeff's heaviest scowl.

A minute later, to Doris's mingled relief and dread, came the sounds of the first arrival.

This proved to be a Mr. Griggs and his son, a horsey young man, whom she vaguely knew by sight, having encountered him when following the hounds. Mr. Griggs was a jolly old farmer, with a somewhat convivial countenance. He shook her warmly by the hand, and asked her how she liked being married.

Doris was endeavouring to reply to this difficult question as airily as possible when three more of Jeff's friends made their appearance, and were brought up by Jeff in a group for introduction, thereby relieving her of the obligation.

The party was now complete, and they all sat down to supper in varying degrees of shyness. Doris worked hard to play her part as hostess, but it was certainly no light task. Two of the last comers were brothers of the name of Chubb, and from neither of these could she extract more than one word at a time. The third, Farmer Locke, was of the aggressive, bulldog type, and he very speedily asserted himself. He seemed, indeed, somewhat inclined to browbeat her, loudly arguing her slightest remark after a fashion which she found decidedly exasperating, but presently discovered to be his invariable habit with everyone. He flatly contradicted even Jeff, but she was pleased to hear Jeff bluntly hold his own, and secretly admired him for the achievement.

On the whole, the meal was not quite so much of an ordeal as she had anticipated, and she was just

beginning to congratulate herself upon this fact when she discovered that young Griggs was ogling her with most unmistakable familiarity whenever she glanced his way. She at once cut him pointedly, and with supreme disdain, only to find his father, who was seated on her right, doing exactly the same thing.

Furious indignation entered her sore soul at this second discovery, and from the smiling, genial hostess she froze into a marble statue of aloofness. But tongues were loosened somewhat by that time, and her change of attitude did not apparently affect the guests.

Mr. Locke continued his aggressive course, and the brothers Chubb were emboldened to take it by turns to oppose him, while old Griggs drank deeply and smacked his lips, and young Griggs told Jeff anecdotes in an undertone which he interspersed with bold glances in the direction of his stony-faced young hostess.

The appearance of Jim Dawlish carrying a steaming bowl of punch seemed to Doris at length the signal for departure, and she rose from the table.

Jeff instantly rose at the farther end, and she divined that he had no wish to detain her. Mr. Griggs the elder, on the other hand, was loud in protest.

"We haven't drunk your health yet, missis," he said.

She forced herself to smile. "That is very kind of you. I am sure Jeff will return thanks for me."

She made it evident that she had no intention of remaining, protest notwithstanding, so Mr. Griggs arose and turned to open the door, still loudly deplor-

ing her departure. Young Griggs was already there however. He leered at her as she approached him and it occurred to her that he was not very steady on his legs. She prepared him an icy bow, which she was in the very act of executing when he made a sudden lurch forward, and caught her round the waist. She heard him laugh with coarse mirth, and had a glimpse of the bunch of mistletoe dangling above their heads ere she fiercely pushed him from her into the passage.

The next instant Jeff was beside her, and she turned and clung to him in desperation.

"Jeff, don't let him!" she cried.

Jeff stretched out an arm to keep the young man back. A roar of laughter rose from the remaining guests.

"Kiss her yourself then, Jeff!" cried old Griggs hammering on the table. "You've got her under the mistletoe."

"He daren't!" said Jim Dawlish, with a wink.

"Afraid to kiss his own wife!" gibed Locke, and the Chubb brothers laughed in uproarious appreciation of the sally.

It was then that Doris became aware of a change in Jeff. The arm he had stretched out for her protection suddenly encircled her. He bent his face to hers.

"They shan't say that!" he muttered under his breath.

She divined his intention in an instant, and a wild flame of anger shot up within her. This was how he treated her confidence! She made a swift effort

to wrench herself from him, then, feeling his arm tighten to frustrate her, she struck him across the face in frantic indignation.

Again a roar of laughter arose behind them, and then very suddenly she forgot everyone in the world but Jeff, for it was as if at that blow of hers an evil spirit had taken swift possession of him. He gripped her hands with savage strength, forcing them behind her, and so holding her, with eyes that seared her soul, he kissed her passionately, violently, devouringly, on face and neck and throat, sparing her not a whit, till in an agony of helpless shame she sank powerless in his arms.

She heard again the jeering laughter in the room behind her, but between herself and Jeff there was a terrible silence, till abruptly he set her free, saying curtly, "You brought it on yourself. Now go!"

Her knees were shaking under her. She was burning from head to foot, as though she had been wrapped in flame. But with an effort she controlled herself.

She went in utter silence, feeling as if her heart were dead within her, mounted the stairs with growing weakness, found and fumbled at her own door, entered at last, and sank inert upon the floor.

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTMAS MORNING

CHRISTMAS morning broke with a sprinkle of snow, and an icy wind that blew from the north, promising a heavier fall ere the day was over.

Jeff was late in descending, and he saw that the door of Doris's room was open as he passed. He glanced in, saw the room was empty, and entered to lay a packet that he carried on her dressing-table. As he did so, his eyes fell upon an envelope lying there, and that single glance revealed the fact that it was addressed to him.

He picked it up, and, turning, cast a searching look around the room. Across the end of the great four-poster bed hung the black lace gown she had worn the previous evening, but the bed itself was undisturbed. He saw in a moment that it had not been slept in. Sharply he turned to the envelope in his hand, and ripped it open. Something bright rolled out upon the floor. He stopped it with his foot. It was her wedding-ring.

An awful look showed for a moment in Jeff's eyes and passed. He stooped and picked up the ring; then, with a species of deadly composure more terrible than any agitation, he took out the letter that the envelope contained.

It was very short—the first letter that she had ever written to him.

"DEAR JEFF," it ran,

"After what happened last night, I do not think you will be surprised to hear that I feel I cannot stay any longer under your roof. I have tried to be friends with you, but you would not have it so, and now it has become quite impossible for me to go on. I am leaving for town by the first train I can catch. I am going to work for my living, and some day I shall

hope to make good to you all that I know you have spent on my comfort.

"Please do not imagine I am going in anger! I blame myself more than I blame you. I never ought to have married you, knowing that I did not love you in the ordinary way. But this is the only course open to me now. So good-bye!

"DORIS."

Jeff Ironside looked up from the letter, and out across the grey meadows. His face was pale, the square jaw absolutely rigid; but there was no anger in his eyes, only the iron of an implacable determination. For several seconds he watched the feathery snow-flakes drifting over the fields; then, with absolute steadiness, he returned both letter and ring to the envelope, placed them in his pocket and turning, left the room.

Granny Grimshaw met him at the foot of the stairs. "Oh, Master Jeff," she said, "I am that worried. We can't find Mrs. Ironside."

Jeff paused an instant and turned his grim face to her. "It's all right, Granny. I know where she is," he said. "Keep the breakfast hot!"

And with that he was gone.

He drove out of the yard a few minutes later in his dogcart, muffled in a great coat with the collar up to his ears.

At the station, Doris sat huddled in a corner of the little waiting-room counting the dreary minutes as she waited for her train. No one beside herself was going by it.

She had walked across the fields, and had made a

détour to leave a note at the Manor for Hugh. She could not leave Hugh in ignorance of her action.

She glanced nervously at the watch on her wrist. Yes, Jeff probably knew by this time. How was he taking it? Was he very angry? But surely he must see how impossible he had made her life with him.

Restlessly she arose and went to the window. It had begun to snow in earnest. The road was all blurred and grey with the falling flakes. She shivered again. Her feet were like ice. Very oddly her thoughts turned to that day in September when Jeff had knelt before her and drawn off her muddy boots before the great open fire. A great sigh welled up within her and her eyes filled with quick tears. If only he would have consented to be her friend. She was so lonely—so lonely!

There came the sound of wheels along the road and she turned away. Evidently someone else was coming for the train. A little tremor of impatience went through her. Would the train never come?

The wheels stopped before the station door. Someone descended, and there followed the sound of a man's feet approaching her retreat. A hand was laid upon the door, and she braced herself to meet a possible acquaintance. It opened, and she glanced up.

"Oh, Jeff!" she said.

He shut the door behind him and came forward. His face was set in dogged, unyielding lines.

"I have come to take you back," he said.

She drew sharply away from him. This was the last thing she had expected.

Desperately she faced him. "I can't come with you

Jeff," she said. "My mind is quite made up. I am very sorry for everything, especially sorry that you have taken the trouble to follow me. But my decision is quite unalterable."

Her breath came fast as she ended. Her heart was throbbing in thick, heavy strokes. There was something so implacable in his attitude.

He did not speak at once, and she stood before him, striving with all her strength to still her agitation. Then quite calmly he stood back and motioned her to pass him. "Whatever you decide to do afterwards," he said, "you must come back with me now. We had better start at once before it gets worse."

A quiver of anger went through her; it was almost a sensation of hatred. She remained motionless. "I refuse," she said in a low voice, her grey eyes steadily raised to his.

She saw his black brows meet, but he gave no sign of impatience. "And I—insist," he said stubbornly.

She felt the blood receding from her face. It was to be open conflict, then. She collected all her resolution to oppose him, for to yield at that moment was out of the question.

It was then, while she stood summoning her forces, that there came to her ears the distant hum and throb of an approaching train. It was coming at last. A porter ran past the window that looked upon the platform, announcing its approach with a dismal yell. Doris straightened and turned to go.

Jeff turned also. An odd light sprang up in his gipsy eyes. He went straight to the door ere she could reach it, locked it, and withdrew the key.

That fired Doris. Her composure went in a single instant. "Jeff," she exclaimed, "how dare you?"

He turned to the dingy window overlooking the line. "You compel me," he said.

She sank back impotent against the table. He stood staring grimly forth, filling the window with his bulk.

Nearer came the train and nearer. Doris felt the hot blood drumming in her brain. Something that was very nearly akin to frenzy entered into her. She stood up with sudden, fierce resolution.

"Jeff," she said, "I will not be kept here against my will! Do you hear? I will not! Give me that key!"

He took no more notice of the command than if it had been the buzzing of a fly. His attention apparently was caught by something outside. He leaned forward, watching intently.

Something in his attitude checked her wrath at its height. It was as though a cold hand had been laid upon her heart. What was it he was looking at? She felt she must know. As the train thundered into the station she went to his side and looked forth also.

The next moment with a shock that was physical, she saw the object of his interest. Hugh Chesyl, with a face of grave perturbation, was standing on the platform, searching this way and that. It was evident that he had but just arrived at the station, and in a flash she divined the reason of his coming. Quite obviously he was looking for her.

Sharply she withdrew herself from the window, and in the same moment Jeff also turned. Their eyes met, and Doris caught her breath.

For it was as if a sword had pierced her. In a single, blinding instant of revelation she read his thought, and sheer horror held her silent before him. She stood as one paralyzed.

He did not utter a word, simply stood and looked at her, with eyes grown devilish in their scrutiny. Then very suddenly and terribly he laughed, and flung round on his heel.

In that instant Doris's powers returned to her, urged by appalling necessity. She sprang forward, reached the door, set her back against it, faced him with the wild courage of agonizing fear.

"Jeff! Jeff!" she panted. "What are you going to do?"

The train had come to a standstill. There was a commotion of voices and running feet. Jeff, still with that awful look in his eyes, stood still.

"You will miss your train," he said.

"What are you going to do?" she reiterated.

He smiled—a grim, dreadful smile. "I am going to see you off. You can go now. Your friend Chesyl can follow by the next train—when I have done with him."

He had the key in his hand. He stooped to insert it in the lock. But swiftly she caught his wrist. "Jeff, stop—stop!" she gasped; and, as he looked at her: "I'm not going away now!"

He wrung his hand free. "You had better go—for your own sake!" he said.

She flinched in spite of herself from the blazing menace of his eyes, but again necessity spurred her. She stretched out her arms, barring his way.

"I won't! I can't! Jeff—Jeff—for Heaven's sake—Jeff!" Her voice broke in wild entreaty. He had taken her roughly by the shoulders, pulling her from his path. He would have put her from him, but she snatched her opportunity and clung to him fast with all her quivering strength.

He stood still then, suddenly rigid. "I have warned you!" he said, in a voice so deep with passion that her heart quailed and ceased to beat. "Let me go!"

But she only tightened her trembling hold. "You shan't go, Jeff! You shan't insult Hugh Chesyl! He is a gentleman!"

"Is he?" said Jeff, very bitterly.

She could feel his every muscle strung and taut, ready for uncontrolled violence. Yet still with her puny strength she held him, for she dared not let him go.

"Jeff, listen to me! You must listen! Hugh is my very good friend—no more than that. He has come here to say 'Good-bye.' I left a note for him on my way here, just to tell him I was going. He is my friend—only my friend."

"I don't believe you," said Jeff.

She shrank as if he had struck her, but her hands still clutched his coat. She attempted no further protestations, only stood with her white face lifted and clear eyes fixed on his. The red fire that shone fiercely back on her was powerless to subdue her steady regard, though she felt as though it scorched her through and through.

From the platform came the shriek of the guard's whistle. The train was departing.

Doris heard it go with a sick sense of despair. She knew that her liberty went with it. As the last carriage passed she spoke again.

"I will go back with you now."

"If I will take you back," said Jeff.

Her hands clenched upon his coat. An awful weakness had begun to assail her. She fought against it desperately.

Someone tried the handle of the door, pulled at it and desisted. She caught her breath. Jeff's hand went out to open, but she shifted her grasp, and again gripped his wrist.

"Wait! Wait!" she whispered through her white lips.

This time he did not shake her off. He stood with his eyes on hers and waited.

The man on the other side of the door, evidently concluding that the waiting-room had not been opened that day, gave up the attempt and passed on. With straining ears Doris listened to his departing footsteps. A few seconds later she saw Jeff's eyes go to the farther window. Her own followed them. Hugh Chesyl, clad in a long grey ulster, was tramping away through the snow.

He passed from sight, and Doris relaxed her hold. Her face was white and spent. "Will you take me home?" she said faintly.

Slowly Jeff's eyes came back to her, dwelt upon her. He must have seen the exhaustion in her face, but his own showed no softening.

He spoke at last sternly, with grim mastery. "If I take you back it must be on a different footing. You tell me this man is no more to you than a friend. I am even less. Do you think I will be satisfied with that?"

"I have tried to make you my friend," she said.

"And you have failed," he said. "Shall I tell you why? Or can you guess?"

She was silent.

He clenched his hands hard against his sides. "You know what happened yesterday," he said. "It had nearly happened a hundred times before. I kept it back till it got too strong for me. You dangled your friendship before me till I was nearly mad with the want of you. You had better have offered me nothing at all than that."

"Oh, Jeff!" she said.

He went on, heedless of reproach. "It has come to this with me, friendship, if it comes at all, must come after. You tell me Chesyl is not your lover. Do you deny that he has ever made love to you?"

"Since he knew of my marriage - never!" she said.

"Yet you ride home with him in the dark hand in hand!" said Jeff.

The colour flamed in her face and he swiftly died. "Hugh Chesyl is not my lover," she said proudly.

"And you expect me to believe you?" he said.

"I do."

He gazed at her without pity. "You will only secure my belief in you," he said, "by coming to me as my wife."

A great shiver went through her. She stood silent. "As my wife," he repeated, looking straight into her face with eyes that compelled. She was trembling from head to foot. He waited a moment, then: "You would sooner run away with Hugh Chesyl?" he asked very bitterly.

Sheer pain drove her into speech. "Oh, Jeff," she cried passionately, "don't make me hate you!"

He started at that as an animal starts at the goad, and in an instant he took her suddenly and fiercely by the shoulders. "Hate me, then! Hate me!" he said, and kissed her again savagely on her white, panting lips as he had kissed her the night before, showing no mercy.

She did not resist him. Her strength was gone. She hung quivering in his arms till the storm of his passion had passed also. Then: "Let us go!" she whispered. "Let us go!"

He released her slowly and turned to open the door. Then, seeing that she moved unsteadily, he put his arm about her, supporting her. So, side by side and linked together, they went out into the driving snow.

CHAPTER XII

CHRISTMAS NIGHT

DORIS was nearly fainting with cold and misery when they stopped at last before the Mill House door. All the previous night she had sat up listening with nerves on edge, and had finally taken her departure in the early morning without food.

When Jeff turned to help her down she looked at

him helplessly, seeing him through a drifting mist that obscured all besides. He saw her weakness at a single glance, and, mousing the step, took her in his arms.

She sank down against his shoulder. "Oh Jeff, I can't help it," she whispered, through lips that were stiff and blue with cold.

"All right. I know," he said, and for the first time in many days she heard a note of kindness in his voice.

He bore her straight through to the kitchen, and laid her down upon the old oak settle, just as he had done that day in September when first he had brought her to his home.

Granny Grimshaw, full of tender solicitude, came hastening to her, but Jeff intervened.

"Hot milk and brandy—quick!" he ordered, and fell himself to chafing the icy fingers.

When Granny Grimshaw brought the cup, he took it from her, and held it for Doris to drink; and then, when she had swallowed a little and the blood was creeping back into her face, he took off her boots and chafed her feet also.

Granny Grimshaw put some bread into the milk while this was in progress and coaxed Doris to finish it. She asked no questions, simply treating her as she might have treated a lost child who had strayed away. There was a vast fund of wisdom in the old grey head that was so often shaken over the follies of youth.

And, finally, when Doris had a little recovered, she went with her to her room, and helped her to bed.

where she tucked her up with her own hot-water bottle and left her.

From sheer exhaustion Doris slept, though her sleep was not a happy one. Long, tangled dreams wound in a ceaseless procession through her brain, and through them all she was persistently and fruitlessly striving to persuade Jeff to let her go.

In the late afternoon she awoke suddenly to the sound of men's voices in the room below her, and started up in nameless fear.

"Were you wanting anything, my dearie?" asked Granny Grimshaw, from a chair by the fire.

"Who is that talking?" she asked nervously.

"It's Master Jeff and a visitor," said the old woman. "Now, don't you bother your head about them! I'm going along to get you some tea."

She hustled away with the words, and Doris lay back, listening with every nerve stretched. Her husband's deep voice was unmistakable, but the other she could not distinguish. Only after a while there came the sounds of movement, the opening of a door.

When that happened she sprang swiftly from the bed to her own door, and softly opened it.

Two men stood in the hall below. Slipping out on to the landing, she leaned upon the banisters in the darkness and looked down. Even as she did so, a voice she knew well came up out of the gloom—a kindly, well bred voice that spoke with a slight drawl.

"I shouldn't be downhearted, Ironside. Remember, no one is cornered so long as he can turn round and go back. It's the only thing to do when you know you've taken a wrong turning."

Doris caught her breath. Her fingers gripped the black oak rail. She listened in rigid expectancy for Jeff's answer. But no answer came.

In a moment Hugh's voice came again, still calm and friendly. "I'm going away directly. The Squire has been ordered to the South for the rest of the winter, and I've promised to go with him. I suppose we shall start some time next week. May I look it and say 'Good-bye'?"

There was a pause. The girl on the landing above waited tensely for Jeff's answer. It came at last slowly, in a tone that was not unfriendly, but which did not sound spontaneous. "You can do as you like Chesyl. I have no objection."

"All right then. Good-bye for the present! I hope when I do come I shall find that all's well. All will be well in the end, eh, Jeff?"

There was a touch of feeling in the question that made Doris aware that the speaker had gripped her husband's hand.

But again there was a pause before the answer came heavily, it seemed reluctantly. "Yes, it'll be all right for her in the end. Good-bye!"

The front door opened; they went out into the porch together. And Doris slipped back to her room.

Those last words of her husband's rang strangely in her heart. Why had he put it like that?

Her thoughts went to Hugh—dear and faithful friend who had taken this step on her behalf. What had passed between him and her husband during that interview in the parlour? She longed to know.

But whatever it had been, Hugh had emerged

victorious. He had destroyed those foul suspicions of Jeff's. He had conquered the man's enmity, overthrown his passionate jealousy, humbled him into admitting himself to be in the wrong. Very curiously that silent admission of Jeff's hurt her pride almost as if it had been on her behalf. The thought of Jeff worsted by Hugh Chesyl, however deeply in the wrong he might be, was somehow very hard to bear. Her heart ached for the man. She did not want him to be humbled.

When Granny Grimshaw came up with her tea, she was half-dressed.

"I couldn't sleep any longer," she said. "It's dear of you to take such care of me. But I'm quite all right. Dear Granny, forgive me for giving you such a horrible Christmas Day!" She bent suddenly forward and kissed the wrinkled face.

"My dearie! My dearie!" said Granny Grimshaw.

And then, exactly how it happened neither of them ever knew, all in a moment Doris found herself folded close in the old woman's arms, sobbing her heart out on the motherly shoulder.

"You shouldn't cry, darling; you shouldn't cry," murmured Granny Grimshaw, softly patting the slim young form. "It would hurt Master Jeff more than anything to have you cry."

"No, no! He doesn't really care for me. I could bear it better if he did," whispered Doris.

"Not care for you, my dearie? Why, what ever can you be thinking of?" protested Granny Grimshaw. "He's eating his very heart out for you, and 'verily

believe he'd kill himself sooner than make you unhappy."

"Ah! You don't understand," sighed Doris. "He only wants—material things."

"Oh, my dear, my dear," said Granny Grimshaw. "Did you suppose that a man ever lived who could love a woman without? We're human, dear, the very best of us, and there's no getting out of it. Besides, love is never satisfied with half measures."

She drew the girl down into the chair before the fire and fussed over her tenderly till she grew calmer. And then presently she slipped away.

Doris finished her tea slowly with her eyes on the red coals, then rose at length to continue her dressing. As she stood at the table twisting up her hair, her glance fell on a small packet that lay there.

With fingers that trembled a little she opened it. It contained a small object wrapped in a slip of paper. There was writing upon it, which she deciphered as she unrolled it. "For my wife, with all my love. Jeff." And in her hand there lay a slender gold ring, exquisitely dainty, set with pearls. A quick tremor went through Doris. She guessed that it had belonged to his mother.

Again she read the few simple words, they seemed to her to hold an appeal which the man himself could never have uttered, and her heart quivered in response as a finely tempered instrument vibrates to a sudden sound. Had she never understood him?

She finished her dressing with impulsive haste, and with Jeff's gift in her hand turned to leave the room.

Her heart throbbed violently as she descended

What would his mood be when she found him? If he would only be kind to her! Ah, if only he would be kind! Granny Grimshaw was lighting the lamps in the hall and parlour.

"Everyone's out but me," she said. "Master Jeff and I generally keep house alone together on Christmas night. I don't know why he doesn't come in. He went out to see to the horses half an hour ago. He hasn't had his tea yet."

"I will give him his tea," Doris said.

"Very well," said Granny Grimshaw. "I'll leave the kettle on for you while I go up and dress."

Doris went into the parlour to wait. The lamp on the table was alight, the teacups ready, and a bright fire made the room cosy. She went to the window and drew aside the curtain.

The snow had ceased, and the sky was clear. Stars were beginning to pierce the darkness.

Slowly the minutes crawled by. She began to listen for his coming, to chafe at his delay. At last, grown nervous with suspense, she turned from the window and went into the hall. She opened the door and stepped out into the porch.

Still and starlit lay the path before her. The snow had been swept away. Impulse seized her. She felt she could wait no longer. She slipped back into the hall, took a coat of Jeff's from a peg, put it on, and so passed into the open.

The way to the stable lay past the mill-stream. On noiseless feet she followed it. The water was deep and dark and silent. She shivered as she drew near. In the stable beyond, close to the mill, she saw a

light. It was moving towards her. In a moment she discovered Jeff's face above it, and—was it something she actually saw in the face, or was it an illusion created by the swinging lantern?—her heart gave a sudden jerk of horror. For it was to her as if she looked upon the face of a dead man.

She stood still in the shadow of a weeping willow arrested by that look, and watched him come slowly forth.

He moved heavily as one driven by Fate, pulling the stable door to after him. This he turned to lock, then stooped, still with that face as of a death-mask, and deliberately extinguished his lantern.

Doris's heart jerked again at the action, and every pulse began to clamour. Why did he put out the lantern before reaching the house?

The next moment she heard his footsteps, slow and heavy, coming towards her. The path wound along a bank a couple of feet above the mill-stream. He approached till in the darkness he had nearly reached her, then he stopped.

She thought he had discerned her, but the next moment she realized that he had not. He was facing the water; he seemed to be staring across it. And even as she watched he took another step straight towards it.

It was then that like a flashlight leaping from his brain to hers she realized what he was about to do. How the knowledge came to her she knew not, but it was hers past all disputing in that single second of blinding revelation. And just as that morning she

had been inspired to act on sheer wild impulse, so now without an instant's pause she acted again. She sprang from her hiding-place with a strangled cry, and threw her arms about him.

"Jeff! Jeff! What are you doing here?"

He gave a great start that made her think of a frightened animal, and stood still. She felt his arms grow rigid at his sides, and knew that his hands were clenched.

"Jeff!" she cried again, clinging faster. "You—you're never thinking of—of that?"

Her utterance ended in a shudder as she sought with all her strength to drag him away from the icy water.

He resisted her doggedly, standing like a rock. "Whatever I'm thinking of doing is my affair," he said, shortly and sternly. "Go away and leave me alone!"

"I won't!" she cried back to him half-hysterically. "I won't! If—if you're going to do that, you'll take me with you!"

He turned round then and moved back to the path. "Who said I was going to do anything?" he demanded in a voice that sounded half-angry and half-ashamed.

She answered him with absolute candour. "I saw your face just now. I couldn't help knowing. Oh, Jeff, Jeff, is it as bad as that? Do you hate me so badly as that?"

He made a movement of the arms that was curiously passionate, but he did not attempt to take her into them. "I don't hate you," he said, in a voice

that sounded half-choked. "I love you—so horribly"—there was a note of ferocity in the low-spoken words—"that I can never know any peace without you. And since with you it is otherwise, what remedy is there? You love Hugh Chesyl. You only want to be free to marry him. While I——"

He broke off in fierce impotence, and began to thrust her from him. But she held him fast.

"Jeff—Jeff, this is madness. Listen to me! You must listen! Hugh and I are friends, and we shall never be anything more. Jeff, let me be with you! Teach me to love you! You can if you will. Don't—don't ruin both our lives!"

She was pleading with him passionately, still holding him back. And, as she pleaded, she reached up her arms and slowly clasped his neck.

"Oh, Jeff, be good to me—be good to me just this once!" she prayed. "I've made such a hideous mistake, but don't punish me like this! I swear if you go, I shall go too. There'll be nothing left to live for. Jeff—Jeff, if you really love me, spare me this!"

The broken entreaty went into agonized sobbing yet she kept her face upraised to his. Instinctively she knew that in that eleventh hour she must offer all she had.

Several moments throbbed away. She began to think that she had failed. And then very suddenly he moved, put his arm about her, led her away.

Not a word did he utter, but there was comfort in the holding of his arm. She went with him with the curious hushed sense of one who stands on the threshold of that which is sacred.

CHAPTER XIII

A FARMER'S WIFE

TWO eyes, old but yet keen, peered forth into the wintry night, and a grey head nodded approvingly, as Jeff Ironside and his wife came in silence to their home. And then the bedroom blind came down, and Granny Grimshaw sat down cosily by her bit of wood fire to hold a strictly private little service of thanksgiving.

Downstairs into the raftered kitchen two people came, each holding each, both speechless with a restraint that bound them as by a spell.

By nature the woman spoke first, her voice no more than a whisper. "Sit on the settle, won't you? I'm going to get your tea."

His arm fell from her. He sat down heavily, not looking at her. She stepped to the fire and took the empty tea-pot from the hob, then light-footed to the dresser for the tea.

He did not watch her. For awhile he sat staring blindly straight before him. Then slowly he leaned forward, and dropped his head into his hands.

Not till the tea was made did she so much as glance towards him, so intent to all seeming was she upon her task. But when it was done, she looked at him sitting there bowed upon the settle, and very suddenly, very lightly, she came to his side.

"Jeff!" she said.

He neither moved nor spoke.

She laid a shy hand on his shoulder. "Jeff!" Her

voice was pleading and rather breathless, as though she would ask him to bear with her. "I want to thank you so much—so very much—for your Christmas gift. See! I'm wearing it."

She slipped her hand down into his, so that he held it pressed against his cheek. He spoke no word, but against her fingers she felt a quiver.

She bent over him, growing bolder. "Jeff, I—want you to give me back—my wedding ring."

He did not stir or answer.

"Please!" she whispered. "Won't you?"

And then dumbly, keeping his face hidden, he drew her hand down to his breast pocket.

"Is it there?" she whispered. "May I take it?"

Her fingers felt for and found what they sought. Her hand came up again, wearing the ring. And then, with a swift, impulsive movement she knelt before him, clasping his two wrists.

"Jeff—Jeff, will you—will you try to forgive me?"

There followed silence, but very strangely no misgiving assailed her. She strove with gentle insistence to draw the shielding hands away.

At first he resisted her, and then very suddenly he yielded. His hands went out to her, his head dropped forward upon her shoulder. A strangled sob shook him.

And Doris knelt up with all her woman's compassion leaping to his need and clasped her warm arms about him, holding him to her heart.

That broke him, broke him utterly, so that for a while no words could pass between them. For Doris was crying too, even while she sought to comfort.

But at last, with a valiant effort, she checked her tears. "Jeff—darling, don't let us be so—so silly!" she murmured, with one quivering hand laid upon his head. "We've got all we want—both of us. Let's forget it all! Let's begin again!"

He put his arms around her, not lifting his head.

"Can't we?" she said softly. "I'm ready."

He spoke at last below his breath. "You couldn't! You'll never forget what a brute I've been."

She turned her head quickly and laid her cheek against his forehead. "Shall I tell you just how much I am going to remember?"

He was silent, breathing deeply.

"Just this," she said. "That you love me—so much—that you can't do without me, and that you were willing—to give your life—for my happiness. That is what I am going to remember, Jeff, and it will be a very precious memory. And I want to tell you just one little thing before we go any farther. It's about Hugh. I don't love him in the way that you and I count love. I did very nearly for a little while. But that is over. I don't think—I never have quite thought—that he is altogether my sort, or I his. Jeff dear, you believe that?"

"Yes," said Jeff.

"Thank you," she said simply. "I want you to try and believe me always, because I do tell the truth. And now, Jeff, I've got to tell you that I'm dreadfully sorry for the way I've treated you. Yes, let me say it," as he made a quick movement of protest. "It's true. I've treated you abominably, mainly because I didn't understand. I do understand now. You—

you've opened my eyes. Oh, Jeff, thank God they were opened even at the eleventh hour! What should I have done if—if——" She broke off with a shiver, and then nestled to him like a child, as though that were the end of the argument. "And now I'm going to be such a good wife to you," she whispered, "to make up for it all. I always wanted to be a farmer's wife, you know. But you must help me. Jeff, will you?"

"I would die for you," he said, his head still bent as though he could not wholly trust himself to look her in the face.

She gave a funny little tremulous laugh. "Yes, I know. But that wouldn't be a bit of good. You would only break my heart. You don't want to do that, do you?"

"Doris!" he said.

"Why won't you call me Dot?"

"Dot!" said Jeff very softly.

"That's better." Again her voice quivered upon a laugh. Her arms slackened from his shoulders, and instantly his fell away, setting her free. She rose to her feet, yet lingered a moment, bending slightly over him, her eyes very bright.

But Jeff did not move, and with a half-sigh she turned away. "Would you like to carry the tea-pot?" she said.

He got up.

"And you can hang up this coat of yours," she added. "I'll come in a moment."

She watched him go in his slow, strong fashion; then for a few still seconds she stood quite tense with

hands tightly gripped together. What passed within her during those moments only her own heart ever knew, how much of longing, how much of regret, how much of earnest, quivering hope.

She followed him almost at once as she had promised.

The parlour-door was open. She came to it in her light, impetuous way. She halted on the threshold.

"Jeff!" she said. "Come here!"

She reached out her hands to him—little, nervous hands full of purpose. She drew him close. She raised her lips to his. The mistletoe dangled above their heads.

"Will you kiss me, Jeff?" she whispered

He stooped, half-hesitatingly.

Her arms stole about his neck. "You needn't—ever—be afraid to kiss your own wife, dear," she said. "I want your love just in the ordinary way—the ordinary way."

He held her to him. "Dot—Dot—forgive me!"

She shook her head with frank, fearless eyes raised to his. "It was a bad bargain, Jeff. Forget it!"

"And make another?" he suggested.

To which she answered with her quick smile. "Love makes no bargains, Jeff. Love just gives—and gives—and gives."

And as his lips met hers he knew the wondrous truth of what she said. For in that one long kiss she gave him all she had. And love conquered, just in the old, sweet, ordinary way.

THE PLACE OF HONOUR

CHAPTER I

THE BRIDE

"AND that is the major's bride? Ah, what a pity!"

The soft, Irish eyes of Mrs. Raleigh, the surgeon's wife, looked across the ballroom with a very real compassion in their grey depths.

"Pity!" said young Turner, the subaltern who chanced to be at that moment in attendance upon her. "It's worse than that; it's a monstrous shame! She's only nineteen, you know; and he is twenty years older at least."

Mrs. Raleigh sighed.

"You have met her, Phil," she said. "I am going to get you to introduce me. Let us go across to her!"

Mrs. Raleigh was greatly beloved by all subalterns. Her husband's bungalow was open to them day and night, and they took full advantage of the fact.

It was not that there was anything particularly brilliant about the surgeon's wife, but her ready sympathy made her a general favourite, and her kindness of heart was known to be equal to the severest strain.

Therefore, among the boys of the regiment she ruled supreme, and the expression of her lightest wish generally provoked a jealous scramble.

On the present occasion, however, young Turner did not display any especial alacrity to serve her.

"There's such a crowd round her; it's difficult to squeeze in edgeways," he said. "I shouldn't trouble to go across yet if I were you."

Mrs. Raleigh laughed a little and laid her hand on his arm.

"So you don't like hovering on the outskirts, Phil," she said.

He frowned, and then as suddenly smiled.

"I'm not the sort that cares to fool with a married woman," he declared. "There goes Devereux to swell the throng. I say, let's go and have a drink!"

She laughed again as she rose to accompany him. Phil Turner was severely honest in all his ways, and, being a good woman, she liked him for it.

Nevertheless, though she yielded, her eyes still dwelt upon the girl in bridal white who sat like a queen among her courtiers. The dark head that was held so regally erect caught and chained the elder woman's fancy. And the vivid, careless beauty of the face was a thing to bear away in the heart and dream of in solitude. For the girl was lovely with that loveliness which even the most grudging must acknowledge. She shone in the crowd that surrounded her like a rare and brilliant flower in a garden of herbs.

Phil Turner's arm stirred with slight impatience under Mrs. Raleigh's hand, and she turned beside him.

"There is nothing like a really beautiful English girl in all the world," she said, with a smile and another glance in the bride's direction.

Young Turner grunted, and she gave his arm a slight shake.

"You don't deceive me," she said. "You admire her as much as I do. Now be honest!"

He looked at her for a moment moodily. Then—

"Yes," he said abruptly, "I do admire her. But, as for the major, I think he's the biggest fool on this side of the Indian Ocean, and that's saying a good deal."

Mrs. Raleigh shook her head as if she desired to disagree.

"Time alone will prove," she said.

CHAPTER II

THE BRIDEGROOM

"It's been lovely," said the bride. She leant back in the open carriage, gazing with wide, charmed eyes into the vivid Indian night. "And I'm not a bit tired," she added. "Are you?"

The man beside her did not instantly reply. He was a man of medium height, dark and lithe and amazingly strong. It was not his habit to speak much, but what little he said was usually very much to the point. It was his custom to mask his feelings so completely that very few had the smallest inkling as to his state of mind.

He was considered a hard man in his regiment, but he was known to be a splendid soldier, and chiefly for that reason he was respected rather than disliked. But the kindest critic could not have called him either

popular or attractive. And the news of his marriage in England had fallen like a thunderbolt upon his Indian acquaintances, for he had long ago come to be regarded among them as the last man in the world to commit such a folly.

The full extent thereof had not been apparent till his return to his regiment, accompanied by his bride, and then as one man the whole mess had arisen and condemned him in no measured terms, for the bride, with all her entrancing beauty, her vivacity, her charm, was certainly a startling contrast to the man who had wedded her—a contrast so sharp as to be almost painful to the onlookers.

She herself, however, seemed to be wholly unaware of any incongruity. Perhaps she had not seen enough of the world to feel it, or perhaps she was wilfully blind to the things she did not desire to see.

In any case her face, as she lay back in the carriage by her husband's side, expressed only the most complete contentment.

"Are you tired, Eustace?" she asked, as he did not hasten to reply to her first question.

"No," he answered, "not tired; but glad to be going back."

"You've been bored," she said quickly. "What a frightful pity! Why did you stay so long?"

Again he paused before replying, and she drummed on his knee with her fingers with slight impatience.

"I had a notion," he said, in his quiet, unhurried tones, "that my wife would have considered it rather hard lines to be dragged away while there was a single man left to dance with."

The bride snatched her hand from his knee with a swiftness of action that could hardly be mistaken. He might have been speaking in fun, but, even so, it was an ugly jest. More probably he had meant the sting that his words conveyed, for, owing to a delicate knee-cap that had once been splintered by a bullet and still at times gave him trouble, Major Tudor was a non-dancer. Whatever his meaning, the remark came upon her flushed triumph like the icy chill before the dawn, dispelling dreams.

"I am sorry," she said, with all the haste of youth "that you sacrificed yourself to please me. I hope you will not do so again. Now that I am married I do not need a chaperon. I could quite well return alone."

It was childishly spoken, but then she was a child and the admiration she had enjoyed throughout the evening had slightly turned her head. He did not reply to her speech. Indeed, it was as if he had not heard it. And her indignation mounted. There was not another man of her acquaintance who would have treated her with a like lack of courtesy. Did he think, because he was her husband, that she belonged to him so completely that he could behave to her exactly as he saw fit? Perhaps. She did not know him very well; nor apparently did he know her. For during the brief six weeks of their married life she had been a little shy, a little constrained, in his presence. But her success had, as it were, unshackled her. Without hesitation she gave her feelings the rein.

"Do you consider that I am not to be trusted?" she asked him sharply.

"I beg your pardon?"

There was a note of surprised interrogation in his voice. She did not look at him, but she knew that his eyebrows were raised, and a faint—quite a faint—sense of misgiving stole over her.

"I asked if you thought me untrustworthy," she said.

"Oh!"

He relapsed into silence again, and she became exasperated.

"Why don't you answer me?" she said, with quick impatience.

He turned his head deliberately and looked at her; and again she tingled with an apprehension which no previous word or action of his had ever justified.

"Unprofitable questions," he said coolly, "like ill-timed jests, are better left alone."

It was the first intentional snub he had ever administered to her, and she quivered under it, furious but impotent. All the evening's enjoyment had gone out of her. She was conscious only of a desire to strike back and wound him as he had wounded her.

She did not utter another word during the drive, and when they reached their bungalow—the daintiest and most luxurious in the station—she alighted without touching the hand he offered her.

Refreshments awaited them in the dining-room, and the bride swept in and helped herself, suffering her cloak to fall from her shoulders. He picked it up and threw it over a chair. His dark face was quite composed and inscrutable. He was not a handsome man, but there was something undeniably striking

about him, a strength of personality that made him somehow formidable. The red and gold uniform he wore served to emphasize the breadth of shoulder, which his height did not justify. He was a splendid wrestler. There was not a man in the mess whom he could not throw.

Yet to those who knew him best, his strength seemed to lie less in what he did than in what he left undone. His restraint was the secret of his power.

Perhaps his young wife felt this, for notwithstanding her utmost effort she knew herself to be at a disadvantage. She set down her glass of sherbet unfinished and turned to the door. It was an abrupt move, but he was ready for it. Before she reached it he was waiting with the handle in his grasp.

"Going to bed, Audrey?" he asked gravely. "Good-night!"

His manner did not betray that he was aware of her displeasure, yet somehow she was quite convinced that he knew. She paused for a second, and then, with her head held high, she was about to pass him without an answering word or glance. But to her amazement he stopped her, his hand upon her arm.

"Good-night!" he said again.

She faced him then in a blaze of passion, with white cheeks and flaming eyes. But as she met his look her heart gave a sudden thump of fright, and in a second her resistance had crumbled away. He did not speak another word, but his look compelled. Undeniably he was master.

Mutely she raised her face for his kiss, and he kissed her.

"Sleep well," he said.

And she went from him, subdued and humbled, to her room.

CHAPTER III

AMID THE RUINS

"Do let us get away somewhere and enjoy ourselves!"

Audrey spoke in a quick undertone to the man nearest to her. It was three weeks since her arrival at the Frontier Station, and she had settled down to the life with the ease of a born Anglo-Indian. Her first vivid enjoyment of its gaieties was a thing of the past, but no one suspected the fact, her husband least of all. She had not, as a matter of fact, been much with him during those three weeks, for she had struck up a warm friendship with Mrs. Raleigh, and in common with all the younger spirits of the regiment she availed herself fully of the privileges of the latter's hospitality.

On the present occasion, however—that of a picnic by moonlight at the crumbling shrine of some long-forgotten holy man—Mrs. Raleigh was absent, and Audrey was bored. She had arrived in her husband's ralli-car, which he had driven himself, but she had speedily drifted away from his side.

There was an element of perversity in her which made her resent the feeling that he only accompanied her into society to watch over her, and, if necessary, to keep her in order. It was not a particularly worthy

feeling, but certainly there was something about his attitude that fostered it.

She guessed, and rightly, that, but for her, he would not have troubled himself to attend these social gatherings, which he obviously enjoyed so little. So when, having deliberately and with mischievous intent given him the slip, she awoke suddenly to the fact that he had followed and was standing near her, Audrey became childishly exasperated and seized the first means of escape that offered.

The man she addressed was one of the least enthusiastic of her admirers, but this did not trouble her at all. She had been a spoilt child all her life, and she was accustomed to make use of others without stopping to ascertain their inclinations.

Phil Turner, however, was by no means unwilling to be made use of in this way. The boy was a gentleman, and was as chivalrous at heart as he was honest.

He turned at once in response to her quick whisper and offered her his arm.

"There's an old well at the back of the ruin," he said. "Come and see it! Mind the stones!"

"That was splendid of you," she said approvingly, as they moved away together. "Are you always so prompt? But I know you're not. I shouldn't have asked you, only I took you for Mr. Devereux. You are very like him at the back."

"Never heard that before!" he responded bluntly; "don't believe it, either, if you will forgive my saying so."

She laughed, a merry, ringing laugh.

"Oh, don't you like Mr. Devereux?"

"Yes, he's all right." Phil seldom spoke a disparaging word of any of his comrades. "But I haven't the smallest wish to be like him," he added.

Audrey laughed at him again, freely, musically. She found this young officer rather more entertaining than the rest.

They reached the other side of the shrine. Here, in a *débris* of stones and weeds, there appeared the circular mouth of an old well, forgotten like the shrine and long disused.

Audrey examined the edge with a fastidious air, and finally sat down on it. The place was flooded with moonlight.

"I wish I were a man," she said suddenly.

"Good Heavens! Why?"

He asked the question in amazement.

"I should like to be your equal," she told him gaily.

"I should like to do and say to you just exactly what I liked."

Phil considered this seriously.

"You can do both without being my equal," he remarked at length in his bluntest tone, "that is, if you care to condescend."

"Goodness!" laughed Audrey. "That's the only pretty thing I have ever heard you say. I am sure it must be your first attempt. Now isn't it?"

He laughed.

"And it wasn't strictly honest," proceeded Audrey daringly. "You know you don't think that of any woman under the sun."

He did not contradict her. He had a feeling that she was fooling him, but somehow he rather liked it.

"What about the women under the moon?" he said.
"Perhaps they are different."

She nodded merrily.

"Perhaps they are," she conceded. "Certainly the men are. Now, you are about the stodgiest person I know by daylight or lamplight, except—except—"
She stopped. "No, I don't mean that!" she said, with an impish smile. "There is no exception."

Phil was frowning a little, but he looked relieved at her amendment.


"Thank you!" he said, brusquely. "I shall never dare to come near you after that."

"Except by moonlight?" she suggested, with the impudent audacity of a child.

What reply he would have made to that piece of nonsense he sometimes wondered afterwards, but circumstances prevented his making any. The words had only just passed her lips when she sprang to her feet with a wild shriek of horror, shaking her arm with frantic violence.

"A snake!" she cried. "Take it away! Take it away! It's on my wrist!"

Phil Turner, though young, was accustomed to keep his wits about him, and, luckily for the girl, her agony did not scare them away. He had seized her arm in a fierce grip almost before her frenzied appeal was uttered. A small snake was coiled round her wrist, and he tore it away with his free hand, not caring how he grasped it. He tried to fling the thing from him, but somehow his hold upon it was not sufficient. Before he knew it the creature had shot up his sleeve.

The next instant he had shaken it  own again with

a muffled curse and was trampling it savagely and vindictively into the stones at his feet.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, wheeling sharply.

"No," gasped Audrey, "no! But you——"

"Yes, the little beast's bitten me," he returned.

"You see——"

"Oh, where, where?" she cried. "Let me see! Quick, quick! Something must be done! Can't you suck it?"

He pushed up his sleeve.

"No; can't get at it," he said. "It's just below the elbow. Never mind; it isn't serious!"

He would have tweaked his sleeve down again, though he was pale under his sunburn. But Audrey stopped him, holding his bare arm between her hands.

"Don't be a fool!" she gasped vehemently. "If you can't, I can—and I will!"

Before he could stop her she had stooped, still holding him fast, and put her lips to the tiny puncture in his flesh, on which scarcely more than a speck of blood was visible.

Phil stiffened and stood still, every nerve rigid, as if something had transfixed him. At last, hurriedly, jerkily, he spoke:

"Mrs. Tudor—for Heaven's sake! I can't let you do this. It wasn't poisonous, ten to one. Don't! I say, Audrey—please don't!"

His voice was imploring, but she paid no heed. Her lips continued to draw at the wound, while he, half-distracted, bent over her, protesting, scarcely conscious of what he said, yet submitting in spite of himself.

There came the sound of running feet, and he guessed that her scream had given the alarm. He stood up with mingled agitation and relief, and an instant later was face to face with her husband.

"I—couldn't help it!" he stammered. "It was a snake-bite."

People were crowding round them with questions and exclamations. But Tudor gave utterance to neither. He only put his hand on his wife's shoulder and spoke to her.

"That will do, Audrey," he said. "There's a doctor here. Leave it to him!"

At his words Audrey straightened herself, quivering all over; and then, unnerved by sheer horror, she put out her hands with an unconscious, groping gesture, and fainted.

CHAPTER IV

A MORNING CALL

AUDREY had been an only girl at home, and had run wild all her life amongst a host of brothers. She had seen next to nothing of the world previous to her marriage, consequently her knowledge of its ways was extremely slender.

That she had grown up headstrong and extremely unconventional was scarcely to be wondered at.

It had been entirely by her own choice that she had married Eustace Tudor. She had just awakened to the fact that the family nest, like the family purse, was of exceedingly narrow dimensions; and a passion for exploring both mentally and physically was hers.

They had met only a couple of months before he was due to sail for India, and his proposal to her had been necessarily somewhat precipitate. She had admired him wholeheartedly, for he was a soldier of no mean repute, and the glamour of marriage had done the rest. She had married him and had, for nearly six weeks thereafter, been supremely happy. True, he had not made much love to her; it was not apparently his way, but he had been full of kindness and consideration. And Audrey had been content.

But, arrived in that Indian Frontier station where all the world was gay, she had become at once the centre of attraction, of admiration; and, responding to this with girlish zest, she had begun to find something lacking in her husband's treatment.

It dawned upon her that, where others worshipped with open devotion, he did not so much as bend the knee. And, over and above this serious defect, he was critical of her actions and inclined to keep her in order.

This made her reckless at first, even defiant; but she found he could master her defiance, and that frightened her. It made her uncertain as to how far it was safe to resist him. And, being afraid of him, she shrank a little from too close or intimate a companionship with him.

She told herself that she valued her liberty too highly to part lightly with it; but the reason in her heart was not this, and with all her wilfulness, her childish self-sufficiency, she knew that it was not.

On the morning that followed the moonlight picnic she deliberately feigned sleep when he arose, lest he

should think fit to prohibit her early ride. She had not slept well after her fright; but she had a project in her mind, and she fully meant to carry it out.

She lay chafing till his horse's hoof-beats told her that he was leaving the house behind him; then she, too, rose and ordered her own horse.

Phil Turner, haggard and depressed after a night of considerable pain, was sitting up in bed with his arm in a sling, drinking tea, when a fellow-subaltern, who with two others shared the bungalow with him, entered, half-dressed and dishevelled, with the astounding news that Mrs. Tudor was waiting in the compound to know how he was.

Phil shot upright in amazement.

"Good Heavens, man! She herself?" he ejaculated.

His brother officer nodded, grinning.

"What's to be done? Send out word that you're still alive though not too chirpy, and would she like anything to drink on the veranda? I can't go, you know; I'm not dressed."

"Don't be an ass! Clear out and send me my bearer!"

Phil spoke with decision. Since Mrs. Tudor had elected to do this extraordinary thing, it was not for him to refuse to follow her lead. He was too far in her debt, even had he desired to do so.

His bearer, therefore, was despatched with a courteous message, and when Phil entered the veranda a quarter of an hour later he found her awaiting him there.

"This is awfully kind of you," he said, as he

grasped her outstretched hand. "I was horribly put out about you! You are none the worse?"

"Not a mite," she assured him. "And you? Your arm?"

He made a face.

"Raleigh was with me half the night, watching for dangerous symptoms; but they didn't develop. He cauterized my arm as a precaution—a beastly business. He hasn't been round again yet, but I believe it's better. Yes, it was a poisonous bite. It would have been the death of me in all probability, but for you. He told me so. I—I'm awfully obliged to you!"

He coloured deeply as he made his clumsy acknowledgements. He did not find it an easy task. As for Audrey, she put out her hands swiftly to stop him.

"Ah, don't!" she said. "You did a far greater thing for me." She shuddered and put the matter from her. "I'm sure you ought not to be up," she went on. "I shouldn't have waited, only I thought you might feel hurt if I went away after you had sent out word that you would see me. I think I'll go now. Good-bye!"

There came the jingle of spurs on the veranda, and both started. The colour rose in a great wave to the girl's face as she saw who it was, but she turned at once to meet the newcomer.

"Oh, Eustace," she said, "so you are back already from the parade-ground!"

He did not show any surprise at finding her there.

"Yes; just returned," he said, with no more than

a quiet glance at her flushed face. "How are you, Phil? Had any sleep?"

"Not much," Phil owned, with unmistakable embarrassment. "But Raleigh says I'm not going to die this time. It was good of you—and Mrs. Tudor—to look in. Won't you have something? That lazy beast Travers isn't dressed yet!"

"Oh, yes, he is!" said Travers, appearing at that moment. "I'll punch your head for you, my boy, when we're alone! Hullo, Major! Come to see the interesting invalid? You'll have some breakfast, won't you? Mrs. Tudor will pour out for us."

But Tudor declined their hospitality briefly but decidedly, and Audrey was obliged to support him.

Travers assisted her to mount, expressing his regret the while; and when they were gone he turned round to his comrade with a grin.

"The major seems to be in a genial mood this morning," he remarked. "Had they arranged to meet here?"

But Phil turned back into the bungalow with a heavy frown.

"The major's a bungling fool!" he said bitterly.

CHAPTER V

THE BARRIER

TUDOR was very quiet and pre-occupied during breakfast, but Audrey would not notice it; and when at length she rose from the table she laid her fingers for a second on his shoulder in a passing caress.

He turned instantly and took her hand

"Just a moment, Audrey!" he said gravely.

She stopped unwillingly, her hand fidgeting ineffectually to be free.

He rose, still holding it in a quiet, strong grasp. He was frowning slightly.

"I only want to say," he said, "that what you did this morning was somewhat unusual, though you may not have been aware of it. Please don't do it again!"

Her cheeks flamed, and she met his eyes defiantly. She left her hand in his rather than prove her weakness, but quite suddenly she was trembling all over. It was a moment for asserting her freedom of action, and she fully meant to do so; but she was none the less afraid.

"I was aware of it," she said, speaking very quickly before his look could disconcert her. "But then what I did last night was unusual, too. Also what Phil Turner did for me. You—you don't seem to realize that he saved my life!"

"I think you discharged your debt," Tudor returned, with a certain dryness that struck her unpleasantly.

"What else could I have done?" she demanded stormily. "If you had been in my place——"

He stopped her.

"I was not discussing that," he said. "I have not blamed you for that. Under the circumstances, you did the best thing possible. But I can't say the same of your conduct this morning; and since you knew that what you did was highly unconventional, I blame you for it. I hope you will be more careful in the future."

Audrey was chafing openly before he ended.

"You treat me like a child," she broke in, the instant he paused. "You don't give me credit for any judgment or discretion of my own."

He raised his eyebrows.

"That is hardly remarkable," he said.

She snatched her hand from him at last, too exasperated for the moment to care what she did or how she did it.

"It is remarkable," she declared, her voice quivering with wrath. "It—it's intolerable. And there's something else that struck me as remarkable, too, and that is that you don't think it worth while even to thank Phil for—for saving my life last night. I think you might have expressed a little gratitude, even—even if you didn't feel it."

The bitter words were uttered before she realized their full bitterness. But the moment she had spoken them she knew, for his face told her.

A dead silence followed her outburst, and while it lasted she was casting about wildly for some means of escape other than headlong flight. Then, as if he read her impulse in her eyes, he moved at last and turned aside.

She did not hear his sigh as she made her escape, or even then she might have scaled the barrier that divided them, and found beyond it a better thing than the freedom she prized so highly.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONFESSION

"COME in and sit down, Mrs. Tudor! Mrs. Raleigh isn't at home. But she can't be long now. I have been waiting nearly half-an-hour."

Phil Turner hoisted himself out of the easiest chair in the Raleighs' drawing-room as he uttered the words, and advanced with a friendly smile to greet the newcomer.

"Oh, isn't she in?" said Audrey. "I am afraid I took her for granted at the door."

"We all do," he assured her. "It is what she likes best. Do you know, I haven't seen you for nearly a fortnight? I called, you know, twice; but you were out."

Audrey laughed inconsequently.

"Why don't you treat me as you treat Mrs. Raleigh?" she said. "Come in and wait, next time!"

Phil smiled as he handed her to the chair he had just vacated.

"The major isn't so kind to subalterns," he said. "He would certainly think, if he didn't say it, that it was like my cheek."

Audrey frowned over this.

"I don't see what he has to do with it," she declared finally. "But it doesn't signify. How is your arm?"

"Practically convalescent, thanks! There's nothing like first aid, you know. I say, Mrs. Tudor, you weren't any the worse? It didn't hurt you?"

He looked down at her with anxiety in his frank

eyes, and Audrey was conscious suddenly that he was no longer a mere casual acquaintance. Perhaps she had been vaguely aware of it before, but the actual realization of it had not been in her mind till that moment.

She laughed lightly.

"Of course not," she said. "How could it? Don't be so ridiculous, Phil!"

His face cleared.

"That's right," he said heartily. "Don't mind me! But I couldn't help wondering. And I thought it was so decent of you to come round and look me up on that first morning."

Audrey's smile faded.

"I am glad you thought it was decent, anyhow," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "No one else did."

"Oh, rot, Mrs. Tudor!"

Phil spoke hastily. He was frowning, as his custom was when embarrassed.

She looked up at him and nodded emphatically.

"Yes, it was—just that," she said, an odd little note of passion in her voice. "I never thought of these things before, but it seems that here no one thinks of anything else."

"Don't take any notice of it," said Phil. "It isn't worth it."

"I can't help myself," said Audrey. "You see—I'm married!"

"So is Mrs. Raleigh." Phil spoke with sudden heat. "But she doesn't care."

"No, I know. But her husband is such an old dear. Everything she does is right in his eyes."

It was skating on thin ice, and Phil at least realized it. He made an abrupt effort to pull up.

"Yes, I'm awfully fond of Major Raleigh," he said. "By the way, he's an immense admirer of yours. Your promptitude the other night quite won his heart. He complimented your husband upon it."

"Did he? What did Eustace say?"

There was more than curiosity in Audrey's voice.

"I don't know."

Phil's eyes suddenly avoided hers. He spoke in a dogged, half-surlly tone.

Audrey sat and looked at him for a moment. Then lightly she rose and stood before him.

"Tell me, please!" she said imperiously.

He made a sharp gesture of remonstrance.

"Sorry," he said, after a moment, as she waited inexorably. "I can't!"

"Oh, but you can!" she returned. "You're not to say you won't to me."

He looked down at her.

"I am sorry!" he said less brusquely: "But it can't be done. It isn't worth a tussle, I assure you, nor is it worth the possible annoyance it might cause you if you had your way. Look here, can't we talk of something else?"

She laid her hand impulsively on his arm.

"Tell me, Phil!" she said.

He drew back abruptly.

"You put me in a beastly position, Mrs. Tudor," he said. "I hate repeating things. It isn't fair to corner me like this."

"Don't be absurd!" said Audrey. Her face was

flushed and determined. She was bent upon having her own way in this, at least. "I shall begin to hate you in a minute."

But Phil could be determined, too.

"Can't help it," he said; but there was genuine regret in his voice. "You'll have to, I'm afraid."

He was scarcely prepared for the effect of his words. She flung away from him in tempestuous anger and turned as if to leave the room. But before she reached the door some other impulse apparently overtook her. She stopped abruptly with her back to Phil, and stood for what seemed to him interminable seconds, fumbling with her handkerchief.

Then, before he had fully realized the approaching catastrophe, her self-control suddenly deserted her. She sank into a chair with her hands over her face and began to cry.

Now, Phil was young, and no woman had ever thus abandoned herself to tears in his presence before. The sight sent a sharp shock through him that was almost like a dart of physical pain. It paralyzed him for an instant; but the next he strode forward, convention flung to the winds, desirous only to comfort. He reached her and bent over her, one hand upon her shaking shoulder.

"I say, Mrs. Tudor, don't—don't!" he urged. "What is the matter? You're not crying because I wouldn't do as you asked me? You couldn't care all that for such a trifle?"

His voice was husky with agitation. He felt guiltily that it was all his fault, and he could have kicked himself for his clumsiness.

She did not answer him, nor did her sobs grow less. It was the pent-up misery of weeks to which she was giving vent, and having yielded, it was no easy matter to check herself again.

Phil became desperate and knelt down by her side, almost as distressed as she.

"I say," he pleaded—"I say, Audrey, don't cry! Tell me what is wrong! Let me help you! Give me a chance, anyhow! I—I'd do anything in the world, you know. Only tell me!"

He drew one of her hands away from her face and held it between his own. She did not resist him. Her need of a comforter just then was very great. Her head was bowed almost against his shoulder, and it did not occur to either of them that they were transgressing the most elementary laws of conventionality.

"You can't help me," she sobbed at last. "No one can. I'm just lonely and miserable and homesick. I hate this place and everyone in it, except—except you—and a few others. I wish I were back in England. I wish I'd never left it! I wish—I wish—I'd never married!"

Her voice came muffled and piteous. It was the cry of a desolate child. And all the deep chivalry in Phil's soul quivered and thrilled in response. Before he knew it, tender, consoling words had sprung to his lips.

"Don't cry, dear; don't cry!" he said. "You'll feel better about it presently. We all go through it, and it's beastly, I know, I know. But it won't last. Nothing does in this chancy world. So what's the good of fretting?"

She could not tell him. Her trouble was too immense at that moment to bear discussion. But he comforted her. She liked the feel of his hand upon her shoulder, the firm, friendly grasp of his finger about her own.

"I sometimes think I can't go on," she whispered through her tears. "It's like being in prison, and I want to run away. Only I can't—I can't. I've got to bear it all my life."

A slight sound from the open window followed this confidence, and Phil looked up sharply. Audrey had not heard it, and she did not notice his movement.

Her head was still bent; and over it Phil, glaring like a tiger, met the quiet, critical eyes of the girl's husband.

He rose to his feet the next instant, but he did not utter a word.

As for Tudor, he stood quite motionless, quite inscrutable, for the space of seconds, looking gravely in upon them. Then, to Phil's unspeakable amazement, he turned deliberately and walked away. There was thick matting on Mrs. Raleigh's veranda, and his receding footsteps made no sound.

CHAPTER VII

THE EXPLANATION

"THERE!" said Audrey, a few seconds later, "I've been a perfect idiot, I know; but I'm better now. Tell me, do I look as if I had been crying?"

She raised her pretty woebegone face to his and smiled very faintly.

There was something unmistakably grim about Phil at that moment, and she wondered why.

"Of course you do," he said bluntly.

Audrey got up and peered at herself uneasily in a mirror.

"It doesn't show much," she said, after a careful inspection. "And, anyhow"—turning round to him—"I don't know what you have to be cross about. It—it was all your fault."

Phil groaned and held his peace. She would know soon enough, he reflected.

Audrey drew nearer to him.

"Tell me what he said to Major Raleigh, Phil!" she said rather tremulously.

He shrugged his shoulders and yielded.

"He only said that he wished your discretion equalled your promptitude in emergencies," he said.

"Oh," said Audrey. "Was that all? Well, I think you might have told me before."

Phil laughed grudgingly. The situation was abominable, but her utter childishness palliated it. How was Tudor going to treat the matter, he wondered? What if he

A sudden thought flashed across Phil's brain, and his face grew set. Of course it had been his fault, since she said so. It remained therefore for him to extricate her, if he could. He turned to her.

"Look here, Mrs. Tudor," he said, in a judicious, elder-brotherly tone, "I think it's a mistake, don't you know, to let yourself get depressed over—well, little things. I know what it is to feel down on your luck. But luck turns, you know, and—and—he's a good

sort—a bit stiff and difficult to get on with, but still—a good sort. You won't think me rude if I leave you now? I didn't expect Mrs. Raleigh to be so long, and I'm afraid I can't wait any longer. I've got to dress for mess."

"Goodness!" said Audrey, with a glance at the clock. "Does it take you two hours? No, don't scowl! I'm only joking, so you needn't be cross. Good-bye then! Thank you for being kind to me."

Her hand lay in his for a moment. She was smiling at him rather sadly, notwithstanding her half-banter-ing words.

Phil paused a second.

"I'm confoundedly sorry!" he said impulsively. "Don't cry any more!"

She shook her head and withdrew her hand.

"Who says I've been crying?" she said lightly. "Go away and don't be silly!"

He took her at her word and departed.

At the gate of the compound he met Mrs. Raleigh, but he refused to turn back with her.

"I really must go; I've got an engagement," he said. "But Mrs. Tudor is waiting for you. Keep her as long as you can! I believe she's a bit down—homesick, you know." And he hurried away, breaking into a run as soon as he reached the road.

He went straight to the Tudors' bungalow without giving himself time to flinch from the interview that he had made up his mind he must have.

The major *sahib* was in, the *khitmutgar* told him, and Phil scribbled an urgent message on his card and sent it to him. Two minutes later he was shown into

his superior officer's presence, and he realized that he stood committed to the gravest task he had ever undertaken.

Major Tudor was sitting unoccupied before the writing-table in his smoking-room, but he rose as Phil entered. His face was composed as usual.

"Well, Mr. Turner?" he said, as Phil came heavily forward.

Phil, more nervous than he had ever been before, halted in front of him.

"I came to speak to you, sir," he said with an effort, "to—to explain——"

Tudor was standing with his back to the light. He made no attempt to help him out of his difficulties.

Phil came to an abrupt pause; then, as if some inner force had suddenly come to his assistance, he straightened himself and tackled the matter afresh.

"I came to tell you, sir," he said, meeting Tudor's eyes squarely, "that I have nothing to be ashamed of. In case"—he paused momentarily—"you should misunderstand what you saw half-an-hour ago, I thought it better to speak at once."

"Very prudent," said Tudor. "But—it is quite unnecessary. I do not misunderstand."

He spoke deliberately and coldly. But Phil clenched his hands. The words cut him like a whip.

"You refuse to believe me?" he said.

Tudor did not answer.

"I must trouble you for an answer," Phil said, forcing himself to speak quietly.

"As you please," said Tudor, in the same cold tone. "I have a question to put first. Had I not chanced

to see what took place, would you have sought this interview?"

The blood rose in a hot wave to Phil's head, but he did not wince or hesitate.

"Of course I shouldn't," he said.

Tudor made a curt gesture of dismissal.

"Out of your own mouth——" he said and turned contemptuously away.

Phil stood quite still for the space of ten seconds, then the young blood in him suddenly mounted to fever pitch. He strode up to his major, and seized him fiercely by the shoulder.

"I won't bear this from any man," he said between his teeth. "I am as honourable as you are! If you say—or insinuate—otherwise, I—by Heaven—I'll kill you!"

The passionate words ceased, and there followed a silence more terrible than any speech. Tudor stood absolutely motionless, facing the young subaltern who towered over him, without a sign of either anger or dismay.

Then at last, very slowly and quietly, he spoke:

"You have made a mistake. Take your hand away!"

Phil's hand dropped to his side. He was white to the lips. Yet he would not relinquish his purpose at a word.

"It hasn't been for my own sake," he said, his voice still shaking with anger he could not subdue.

Tudor made no response. He stood with his eyes fixed steadily upon Phil's agitated face. And, as if

compelled by that searching gaze, Phil reiterated the assertion.

"If I had only had myself to consider," he said, "I shouldn't have—stooped—to offer an explanation."

"Let me remind you," Tudor said quietly, "that I have not asked for one!"

"You prefer to misunderstand?" said Phil quickly.

"I prefer to take my own view," amended Tudor. "If you are wise—you will be satisfied to leave it so."

It was final, and, though far from satisfied, Phil felt the futility of further discussion. He turned to the door.

"Very well, sir," he said briefly, and went out, holding his head high.

As for Tudor, he sat down again before his writing-table with an unmoved countenance, and after a short interval took up his correspondence. There was no anger in his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE DANCE

AUDREY saw no more of Phil Turner for some days. She did not enjoy much of her husband's society either. He appeared to be too busy to think of her, and she in consequence spent most of her time with Mrs. Raleigh. But Phil, who had been one of the latter's most constant visitors, did not show himself there.

It did not occur to Audrey that he absented himself on her account, and she was disappointed not to meet

him. Next perhaps to the surgeon's wife, she had begun to regard him as her greatest friend. Certainly the tie of obligation that bound them together was one that seemed to warrant an intimate friendship. Moreover, Phil had been exceptionally kind to her in distress, kinder far than Eustace had ever been.

She was growing away from her husband very rapidly, and she knew it, mourned over it even in softer moments; but she felt powerless to remedy the evil. It seemed so obvious to her that he did not care.

So she spent more and more of her hours away from the bungalow that had been made so dainty for her presence, and Eustace never seemed to notice that she was absent from his side.

He accompanied her always when she went out in the evening, but he no longer intruded his guardianship upon her, and deep in her inmost heart this thing hurt his young wife as nothing had ever hurt her before. She had her own way in all matters, but it gave her no pleasure; and the feeling that, though he might not approve of what she did, he would never remonstrate, grew and fostered within her till she sometimes marvelled that he did not read her misery in her eyes.

She met Phil Turner again at length at a regimental dance. As usual her card was quickly tiled, but she reserved a waltz for him, and after a while he came across and asked her for one.

"You were very nearly too late," she told him. "Why didn't you come before?"

He looked awkward for a moment. Then—

"I was busy," he said rather shortly. "I'm one of the stewards."

He scrawled his initials across her card and left her again. Audrey concluded in her girlish way that something had made him cross, and dismissed him from her mind.

When at length he came to claim her she was hot and tired and suggested sitting out.

He frowned at the idea, but, upon Audrey waxing imperious, he yielded. They sat out together, but not in the cool dark of the veranda as she had anticipated, but in the full glare of the ballroom amidst all the hubbub of the dancers.

Audrey was annoyed, and showed it.

"I am sure we might find a seat on the veranda," she said.

But Phil was obstinate.

"I assure you, Mrs. Tudor," he said, "I looked in there just now, and every seat was occupied."

"I don't believe you are telling me the truth," she returned.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Thank you!" he said briefly.

Something in the curt reply caught her attention, and she gave him a quick glance. He was looking remarkably handsome in his red and gold uniform with the scarlet cummerbund across his shirt. Vexed as she was with him, Audrey could not help admitting it to herself. His brown, resolute face attracted her irresistibly.

She allowed a considerable pause to ensue before she went to the inevitable attack. Somehow, notwith-

THE PLACE OF HONOUR

standing his surliness, she had not the faintest desire to quarrel with him.

"You're very grumpy to-night," she remarked at length in her cheery young voice. "What's the matter?"

He started and looked intensely uncomfortable.

"Nothing—of course!" he said.

"Why of course, I wonder? With me it's the other way round. I am never cross without a reason."

Audrey was still cheery.

He smiled faintly.

"I congratulate you," he said.

Audrey smiled also. Fully exposed as was their position, there was no one near enough to overhear.

"Well, don't be cross any more, Phil!" she said persuasively. "Cheer up, and come to tiffin with me to-morrow! Will you? I shall be quite alone."

Phil's smile departed instantly. He glanced at her for a second, and then fixed his eyes steadily upon the ground between his feet.

"You're awfully good!" he said at last. "But—thanks very much—I can't."

"Can't?" echoed Audrey, with genuine disappointment. "Oh, I'm sure that's nonsense! Why can't you? You're not on duty?"

"No," he said, speaking slowly, "I'm not on duty; but—fact is, I'm going up to the Hills shooting for a few days, and—I shall be busy, packing guns and things. Besides——"

"Oh, do stop!" she broke in, with sudden impatience. "I know you are only making up as you go along. It's very horrid of you, besides being con-

temptible. Why can't you say at once that you are not coming because you don't want to come?"

Her quick pride had taken fire at sound of his deliberate excuse; and, as was its wont upon provocation, her anger flamed high at a moment's notice.

Phil did not look at her. His expression was decidedly uneasy, but there was a certain grimness about him that did not seem to indicate the probability of any excessive show of docility in face of a brow-beating.

"I don't say it," he said doggedly at length, "because, besides being rude, it wouldn't be strictly true."

"I shouldn't have thought you would have had any scruples of that sort," rejoined Audrey, hitting her hardest because he had managed to hurt her. "They haven't been very apparent to-night."

Phil made no protest, but he was frowning heavily.

She leant slightly towards him, speaking behind her fan.

"Be honest just for a second," she said, "if you can, and tell me; are you tired of calling yourself a friend of mine? Are you trying to get out of it? Because, if you are, it's quite the easiest thing in the world to do. But once done——"

She paused. Phil was looking at her at last, and there was something in his eyes that startled her. A sudden pity rushed over her heart. She felt as she had felt once long ago in England when a dog—an old friend of hers—had been injured. He had looked at her with just such eyes as those that were fixed upon

her now. Their dumb pleading had been almost more than she could bear.

Involuntarily she laid her hand on his arm, music and dancers all forgotten in that moment of swift emotion.

"Phil," she whispered tremulously, "what is it? What is it?"

He did not answer her by a single word. He simply rose to his feet, as if by her action she had suggested it, and whirled her in among the dancers.

He kept her going to the very last chord, she too full of wonder and uncertainty to protest; and then he led her straight through the room to where Mrs. Raleigh stood, surrounded by the usual crowd of subalterns, muttered an excuse, and left her there.

CHAPTER IX

BAD NEWS

It was nearly a week later that Audrey, riding home alone in a 'rickshaw from a polo-match, was overtaken by young Gerald Devereux, a subaltern, who was tearing along on foot as if on some urgent errand. Recognizing her, he reduced his speed and dropped into a jog-trot by her side.

"You haven't heard, of course?" he jerked out breathlessly. "Beastly bad news! Those hill tribes—always up to some devilry! Poor old Phil—infernal luck!"

"What?" exclaimed Audrey. "What has happened to him? Tell me, quick, quick!"

She turned as white as paper, and Devereux cursed himself for a clumsy fool.

"It may not be the worst," he gasped back. "Dash it! I'm so winded! We hope, you know, we hope—but it's usually a knife and good-bye with these ruffians. Still, there's a chance—just a chance!"

"But you haven't told me what has happened yet," cried Audrey, in a fever of impatience.

He answered her, still running by her side.

"The Waris have got him; rushed his camp at night and bagged everything. The coolies were in the know, no doubt. Only his *shikari* got away. He has just come in wounded with the news. I'm on my way to tell the Chief, though I don't see what good he can do."

"You mean you think he is murdered?" gasped Audrey, through white lips.

He nodded.

"Afraid so, poor beggar! Well, so long, Mrs Tudor! We must hope for the best as long as we can."

He put his hand to his cap, and ran on, while Audrey, with a set, white face, was borne to her bungalow.

Her husband was sitting on the veranda. He rose as she alighted and gave her his hand up the short flight of steps to his side.

"You are rather late," he said in his grave way. "I am afraid you will have to hurry."

They were dining out that night, but Audrey had forgotten it. She stared at him as if dazed.

"What is it?" he asked. "Nothing wrong?"

She gasped hysterically.

"Oh, Eustace, an awful thing—an awful thing!" she cried. "Mr. Devereux has just told me——"

Her voice broke, and her lips formed soundless words. She groped vaguely for support with one hand.

Tudor put his arm round her and led her, tottering indoors.

"All right; tell me presently!" he said quietly. "Sit down and keep still for a little!"

He put her into an arm-chair and left her there. In a few seconds he returned with some brandy and water, which he held to her lips in silence. Then setting down the glass, he began to rub her nerveless hands.

Audrey submitted passively at first to his ministrations, but presently as her strength returned she sat up.

"You haven't heard?" she asked him shakily.

"I have heard nothing," he answered. "Can you tell me now?"

"Yes—yes!" She paused a moment to steady her voice. Then—"It's Phil!" she faltered. "He has been taken prisoner—murdered perhaps—by those dreadful hill men! Oh, Eustace"—lifting her face appealingly—"do you think they will kill him? Do you? Do you?"

But Tudor said nothing. He made no attempt to comfort her, and she turned from him in bitter disappointment. His lack of sympathy at such a moment was almost more than she could bear.

"How did Devereux know?" he asked, after a pause. She shook her head.

"He said something about a *shikari*. He was going

to tell the Colonel; but he didn't think it would be any use. He said—he said——”

She broke off, quivering with agitation. Her husband took the glass from the table again and made her drink a little. She tried to refuse, but he insisted.

“You have had a shock. It will do you good,” he said, in his level, unmoved voice.

And Audrey yielded to the mastery she had scarcely felt of late.

The spirit helped to steady her, and at length she rose.

“I am going to my room, Eustace,” she said, not looking at him. “I—can't go out to-night. Perhaps you will make my excuses.”

He did not answer her, and she threw him a swift glance. He was standing stiff and upright. His face was stern and composed; it might have been a stone mask.

“What excuse am I to make?” he asked.

Her eyes widened. The question was utterly unexpected.

“Why, the truth—of course,” she said. “Say that I have been upset by the news, that—that—I haven't the heart—I couldn't—Eustace”—appealing suddenly, a tremor of indignation in her voice—“you don't seem to realize that he is one of my greatest friends. Don't you understand?”

“Yes,” he said—“yes, I understand!”

And she marvelled at the coldness—the deadly, concentrated coldness—of his voice.

“All the same,” he went on, “I think you must make

an effort to accompany me to the Bentleys' to-night. It might be thought unusual if I went alone."

She stared at him in sudden, amazed anger.

"Eustace!" she exclaimed. "How can you be so cruel, so cold-blooded, so—so heartless? How can you expect such a thing of me—to sit at table and hear them all talking about it, and his chances discussed? I couldn't—I couldn't!"

He did not press the point. Perhaps he realized that her nerves in their present condition would prove wholly unequal to such a strain.

"Very well," he said quietly at length. "I will send a note to excuse us both."

"I don't see why you should stay at home," Audrey said, turning to the door. "I would far rather be alone."

He did not explain his motive, and she went out of his presence with a sensation of relief. She had never fully realized before how wide the gulf between them had become.

She remained shut up in her room all the evening, eating nothing, face to face with the horror of young Devereux's brief words. It was the first time within her memory that death had approached her sheltered life, and she was shocked and frightened, as a child is frightened by the terrors of the dark.

Very late that night she crept into bed, dismissing her *ayah*, and lay there shivering and forlorn, thinking, thinking, of the cruel faces and flashing knives that Phil had awaked to see. She dozed at last in her misery, only to wake again with a shriek of nightmare terror, and start up sobbing hysterically.

"Why, Audrey!" a quiet voice said, and she awoke fully, to find her husband standing by her bed.

She turned to him impulsively, hiding her face against him, clinging to him with straining arms. She could not utter a word, for an anguish of weeping overtook her. And he was silent also, bending over her, his hand upon her head.

Gradually the paroxysm passed and she grew quieter; but she still clung closely to him, and at length with difficulty she began to speak.

"Oh, Eustace, it's all so horrible! I can't help seeing it. I'm sure he's dead, or, if he isn't, it's almost worse. And I was so—unkind to him the last time we were together. I thought he was cross, but I know now he was only miserable; and I never dreamt I was never going to see him again, or I wouldn't have been so—so horrid!"

Haltingly, pathetically, the poor little confession was gasped out through quivering sobs, and the face of the man who listened was no longer a stony mask; it was alight and tender with a compassion too great for utterance.

He bent a little lower over her, pressing her head closer to his heart; and she heard its beating, slow and strong and regular, through all the turmoil of her distress.

"Poor child!" he said. "Poor child!"

It was all the comfort he had to offer, but it was more to her than any other words he had ever spoken. It voiced a sympathy which till that moment had been wholly lacking—a sympathy that she desired more than anything else on earth.

"Don't go away, Eustace!" she begged presently.
"It—it's so dreadful all alone."

"Try to sleep, dear!" he said gently.

"Yes, but I dream, I dream," she whispered piteously.

He laid her very tenderly back on the pillow, and sat down beside her.

"You won't dream while I am here," he said.

She clasped his hand closely in both her own and begged him tremulously to kiss her. By the dim light of her night lamp she could scarcely see his face; but as her lips met his a great peace stole over her. She felt as if he had stretched out his hand to her across the great, dividing gulf that had opened between them and drawn her to his side.

About a quarter of an hour later Eustace Tudor rose noiselessly and stood looking down at his young wife's sleeping face. It was placid as an infant's, and her breathing was soft and regular. He knew that, undisturbed, she would sleep so for hours.

And so he did not dare to kiss her. He only bowed his head till his lips touched the coverlet beneath which she lay; and then stealthily, silently, he crept away.

CHAPTER X

THE PRISONER

HEAVENS, how the night crawled! Phil Turner, bound hand and foot, and cruelly cramped in every limb, hitched himself to a sitting posture and began to calculate how long he probably had to live.

There was no moon, but the starlight entered his prison—it was no more than a mud hut, but had it been built of stone walls many feet thick his chance would scarcely have been lessened. It was merely a question of time, he knew, and he marvelled that his fate had been delayed so long.

To use his comrade's descriptive language, he had expected "a knife and good-bye" full twenty hours before. But neither had been his portion. He had been made a prisoner before he was fully awake, and hustled away to the native fort before sunrise. He had been given *chupatties* to eat and spring water to drink, and though painfully stiff from his bonds, he was unwounded.

It had been a daring capture, he reflected; but what were they keeping him for? Not for the sake of hospitality—of that he was grimly certain. There had been no pretence at any friendly feeling on the part of his captors. They had glared hatred at him from the outset, and Phil was firmly convinced, without any undue pessimism, that they had not the smallest intention of sparing his life.

But why they postponed the final deed was a problem that he found himself quite unable to solve. It had worried him perpetually for twenty hours, and, combined with the misery of his bonds, made sleep an impossibility.

Sleep! The very thought of it was horrible to him. It had never struck him before as a criminal waste of the precious hours of life, for Phil was young, and he had not done with mortal existence. There were in it deeps he had not sounded, heights he had never

scaled. He was not prepared to forgo these at the will of a parcel of murderous ruffians who chanced to object to the white man's rule. He had friends, too—friends he could not afford to lose—friends who could not afford to lose him.

Doubtless his murder would be avenged in due course; but—— He grimaced wryly to himself in the darkness, and tried once more to ease his cramped limbs.

From outside came the murmur of voices. He could just see the shoulder of one of his guards at the entrance and the steel glint of a rifle-barrel. He gazed at the latter hungrily. Oh, for just a sporting chance—to be free even in the midst of his enemies with that in his hand!

A shadow fell across the entrance, and he saw the rifle no more. He saw the two Wari sentinels salaaming profoundly, and he began to wonder who the newcomer might be—a personage of some importance apparently.

There followed an interval of some minutes, during which Phil began to chafe with feverish impatience. Then at last the shadow became substance, moving into his line of vision, and a man, wrapped in a long, native garment and wearing a *chudidah* that concealed the greater part of his face, glided into the hut on noiseless, sandalled feet.

He held a naked knife in his hand, and Phil's heart began to thud unpleasantly. It taxed all a man's self-control to face death in cold blood, trussed hand and foot and helpless as an infant. But he gripped himself hard, and faced the weapon without flinching.

It would not do to let these murderous ruffians see a white man afraid.

"Hullo!" he said contemptuously. "Come to put the finishing touch, I suppose? You'll hang for it, you infernal, treacherous brute; but that's a detail you border thieves don't seem to mind."

It eased the tension to hurl verbal defiance at his murderer, and there was just the chance that the fellow might understand a little English. But when his visitor stooped over him and deliberately cut his bonds, he was astounded into silence.

He waited dumfounded, and a muscular hand gripped his shoulder, holding him motionless.

"You'll be all right," a quiet voice said, "if you don't make a confounded fool of yourself."

Phil gave a great start, and the hand that gripped him tightened. Through the gloom he made out the outline of a grim, bearded face.

"Control yourself!" the quiet voice ordered. "Do you think I've done this for nothing? We are alone—it may be for five minutes, it may be for less. Get out of your things—sharp, and let me have them!"

"Great Jupiter—Tudor!" gasped Phil.

"Yes—Tudor!" came the curt response. "Don't stop to jaw! Do as I tell you!"

He took his hand from Phil's shoulder and stood up, backing into the shadows.

Phil stood up, too, straightening himself with an effort. The suddenness of this thing had thrown him momentarily off his balance.

"Quick!" commanded Tudor in a fierce whisper. "Take off your clothes. There isn't a second to lose."

But Phil stood uncertain.

"What's the game, Major?" he asked.

Tudor's hand gripped him again and violently.

"You fool!" he whispered savagely. "Don't stand gaping there! Can't you see it's a matter of life and death? Do you want to be killed?"

"No, but——"

Phil broke off. Tudor in that frame of mind was a stranger to him, but he was none the less one who must be obeyed. Mechanically almost he yielded to the man's insistence and began to strip off his clothes.

Tudor helped him with an energy that neither fumed nor faltered. Mute obedience was all he required. But when he dropped the garment he wore from his own shoulders, Phil paused to protest.

"I am not going to wear that!" he said. "What about you?"

"I can look after myself," Tudor answered curtly. "Get into it—quick! There is no time for arguing. You're going to wear these too."

He pulled the ragged, black beard from his face and the *chuddah* from his head.

But Phil's eyes were opened, and he resisted.

"Heavens above, sir!" he said. "Do you think I'm going to do a thing like that?"

"You must!" Tudor answered.

He spoke quietly, but there was deadly determination behind his quietude. They faced one another in the gloom, and suddenly there ran between them a passion of feeling that blazed unseen like the hidden current in an electric wire.

For a few seconds it burnt fiercely, silently; then

Tudor laid a firm hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"You must," he said again. "The choice does not rest with you. It is made already. It only remains for you to yield—whatever it may cost you—as I am doing."

Phil started as if he had struck him.

"You are wrong, sir," he exclaimed. "On my oath, you are wrong. You don't understand. You never have understood. I—I——"

Tudor silenced him summarily with a hand upon his lips.

"I know, I know!" he said. "There is no time for this. Leave it and go! If it is any comfort to you to know it, I think no evil of you. I realize that what has happened had to happen, was in a sense inevitable, and I blame myself alone. Listen to me! This disguise will take you through all right if you keep your mouth shut. You are a priest, remember, preaching the Jihad, only I've done all the preaching necessary. You have simply to walk straight through them, down the hill till you come to the pass, and then along the river-bed till you strike the road to the Frontier. It's six miles away, but you will do it before sunrise. No, don't speak! I haven't finished yet. You are going to do this not for your own sake or for mine. You think you are going to refuse, but you are not. As for me, your going or staying could make no difference. I have come with a certain object in view, but I shall remain, whether I gain that object or not. That I swear to you most solemnly."

He turned away with the words and began to

loosen his sandals. Phil watched him dumbly. He was face to face with a difficulty of such monstrous proportions that he was utterly nonplussed. From the distance came the sound of voices.

"You had better go," observed Tudor, in steady tones. "The guards are coming back. It will hasten matters for both of us if we are discovered like this."

"Sir," Phil burst out suddenly, "I can't!"

Tudor wheeled swiftly. It was almost as if he had been waiting for that desperate appeal. He caught up the native garment and flung it over Phil's shoulders. He dragged the beard down over his face and secured the *chuddah* about his head. He did it all with incredible rapidity and a strength that would not be gainsaid.

Then, holding Phil fast in a merciless, irresistible grasp, he spoke:

"If you attempt to disobey me now, I'll kill myself with my own hands."

There was no mistaking the resolution of his voice and it wrought the end of the battle—an end inevitable. Phil realized it and accepted it with a groan. He did not utter another word of protest. He was conquered, humiliated, powerless. Only when at last he was ready to depart he stood up and faced Tudor as he had faced him on that day that the latter had refused to give him a hearing.

"I've given in to you," he said; "but it's to save your life, if possible, and for no other reason. You can think what you like of me, but not—of her! Because, before Heaven, I believe this will break her heart."

He would have said more, but Tudor cut him short. "Go!" he said. "Go! I know what I am doing—better than you think!"

And Phil turned in silence and went out into the world-wide starlight.

CHAPTER XI

THE AWAKENING

THE sun was already high when Audrey awoke. She started up, refreshed in body and mind. Her first thought was of her husband. No doubt he had gone out long before. He always rose early, even when off duty.

Then she remembered Phil, and her face contracted as all the trouble of the night before rushed back upon her. Was he still living? she wondered.

She stretched out her hand to ring for her *ayah*. But as she did so her eyes fell upon a table by her side and she caught sight of an envelope lying there. She picked it up.

It was addressed to herself in her husband's handwriting, and, with a sharp sense of anxiety, she tore it open. The note it contained was characteristically brief:

"I hope by the time you read this to have procured young Turner's release, if he still lives—at no very great cost, I beg you to believe. I desire the letter that you will find on my writing-table to be sent at once to the colonel. There is also a note for Mrs. Raleigh, which I want you to deliver yourself. God bless you, Audrey!"

E. T.

Audrey looked up from the letter with startled eyes and white cheeks. What did it mean? What had he been doing in the night while she slept? How was it possible for him to have saved Phil?

Trembling, she sprang from her bed and began to dress. Possibly the note to Mrs. Raleigh might explain the mystery. She would ride round with it at once.

She went into Tudor's room before starting and found the letter for the colonel. It was addressed and sealed. She gave it to a ~~serv~~ with orders to deliver it into the colonel's own hands without delay.

Then, still quivering with an apprehension she would not own, she mounted and rode away to the surgeon's bungalow.

Mrs. Raleigh received her with some surprise.

"Ah, come in!" she said kindly. "I'm delighted to see you, dear; but, sure, you are riding very late. And is there anything the matter?"

"Yes," gasped Audrey breathlessly. "I mean no, I hope not. My husband has—has gone to try to save Phil Turner; and—and he left a note for you, which I was to deliver. He went away in the night, but he—of course he'll—be back—soon!"

Her voice faltered and died away. There was a look on Mrs. Raleigh's face, hidden as it were behind her smile, that struck terror to Audrey's heart. She thrust out the letter in an anguish of unconcealed suspense.

"Read it! Read it!" she implored, "and tell me what has happened—quickly, for I—I don't understand!"

Mrs. Raleigh took the letter, passing a supporting arm around the girl's quivering form.

"Sit down, dear!" she said tenderly.

Audrey obeyed, but her face was still raised in voiceless supplication as Mrs. Raleigh opened the letter. The pause that followed was terrible to her. She endured it in wrung silence, her hands fast gripped together.

Then Mrs. Raleigh turned, and in her eyes was a deep compassion, a motherly tenderness of pity, that was to Audrey the confirmation of her worst fears.

She did not speak again. Her heart felt constricted, paralyzed. But Mrs. Raleigh saw the entreaty which her whole body expressed, and, stooping, she took the rigid hands into hers.

"My dear," she said, "he has gone into the Hills in disguise, up to the native fort beyond Wara, as that is where he expects to find Phil. Heaven help him and bring them both back!"

Audrey stared at her with a stunned expression. Her lips were quite white, and Mrs. Raleigh thought she was going to faint.

But Audrey did not lose consciousness. She sat there as if turned to stone, trying to speak and failing to make any sound. At last, convulsively, words came.

"They will take him for a spy," she said, both hands pressed to her throat as if something there hurt her intolerably. "The Waris—torture—spies!"

"My darling, my darling, we must hope—hope and pray!" said the Irishwoman, holding her closely.

Audrey turned suddenly, passionately, in the enfolding arms and clung to her as if in physical agony.

"You may, you may," she said in a dreadful whisper, "but I can't—for I don't believe. Do you in your heart believe he will ever come back?"

Mrs. Raleigh did not answer.

Audrey went on, still holding her tightly:

"Do you think I don't know why he wrote to you? It was to put me in your care, because—because he knew he was never coming back. And shall I—shall I tell you why he went?"

"Darling, hush—hush!" pleaded Mrs. Raleigh, her voice unsteady with emotion. "There, don't say any more! Put your head on my shoulder, love! Let me hold you so!"

But Audrey's convulsive hold did not relax. She had been a child all her life up to that moment, but like a worn out garment, her childhood had slipped from her, and she had emerged a woman. The old, happy ignorance was gone for ever, and the revelation that had dispelled it was almost more than she could bear. Her newly developed womanhood suffered as womanhood alone can suffer.

And yet, could she have drawn the veil once more before her eyes and so have deadened that agonising pain, she would not have done so.

She was awake now. The long, long sleep with its gay dreams, its careless illusions, was over. But it was better to be awake, better to see and know things as they were, even if the anguish thereof killed her. And so she refused the hushing comfort that only a child—such a child as she had been but yesterday—could have found satisfying.

"Yes, I can tell you—now—why he went," she said

in that tense whisper which so wrung Mrs. Raleigh's heart. "He went—for my sake! Think of it! Think of it! He went because I was fretting about Phil. He went because—because he thought—that Phil's safety—meant—my happiness, and that *his* safety—his—his precious life—didn't—count!"

The awful words sank into breathless silence. Mrs. Raleigh was crying silently. She was powerless to cope with this. But Audrey shed no tears. It was beyond tears and beyond mourning—this terrible revelation that had come to her. By-and-bye, it might be, both would come to her, if she lived.

She rose suddenly at length with a sharp gasp, as of one seeking air.

"I am going," she said, in a clear, strong voice, "to the colonel. He will help me to save my husband."

And with that she turned to the veranda, and met the commanding-officer face to face. There was another man behind him, but she did not look at him. She instantly, without a second's pause, addressed the colonel.

"I was coming to you," she said through her white lips. "You will help me. You must help me. My husband is a prisoner, and I am going into the Hills to find him. You must follow with men and guns. He must be saved—whatever it costs."

The colonel laid his hand on her shoulder, looking down at her very earnestly, very kindly.

"My dear Mrs. Tudor," he said, "all that can be done shall be done, all that is humanly possible. I have already told Turner so. Did you know that he was safe?"

He drew her forward a step, and she saw that the man behind him was Phil Turner himself—Phil Turner, grave, strong, resolute, with all his manhood strung up to the moment's emergency, all his boyhood submerged in a responsibility that overwhelmed the lesser part of him, leaving only that which was great.

He went straight up to Audrey and took the hands she stretched out to him. Neither of them felt the presence of onlookers.

"He saved my life, Mrs. Tudor!" he said simply. "He forced me to take it at his hands. But I'm going back with some men to find him. You stay here with Mrs. Raleigh till we come back. We shall be quicker alone."

A great sob burst from Audrey. It was as if the few, gallant words had loosened the awful constriction at her heart.

"Oh, Phil, Phil!" she cried brokenly. "You understand—what this is to me—how I love him—how love him! Bring him back to me! Promise, Phil promise!"

And Phil bent till his lips touched the hands he held.

"I will do it," he said with reverence—"so help me God!"

CHAPTER XII

THE RETURN

ALL through the day and the night that followed Audrey watched and waited.

She spent the terrible hours at the Raleighs' bungalow, scarcely conscious of her surroundings in her anguish of suspense. It possessed her like a raging fever, and she could not rest. At times it almost seemed to suffocate her, and then she would pace to and fro, to and fro, hardly knowing what she did.

Mrs. Raleigh never left her, caring for her with a maternal tenderness that never flagged. But for her Audrey would almost certainly have collapsed under the strain.

"If he had only known! If he had only known!" she kept repeating. "But how could he know? for I never showed him. How could he even guess? And now he never can know. It's too late, too late!"

Futile, bitter regret! All through the night it followed her, and when morning came the haggard misery it had wrought upon her face had robbed it of all its youth.

Mrs. Raleigh tried to comfort her with hopeful words, but she did not seem so much as to hear them. She was listening, listening intently, for every sound.

It was about noon that young Travers raced in, hot and breathless, but he stopped short in evident dismay when he saw Audrey. He would have with-

drawn as precipitately as he had entered, but she sprang after him and caught him by the arm.

"You have news!" she cried wildly. "What is it? Oh, what is it? Tell me quickly!"

He hesitated and glanced nervously at Mr. Raleigh.

"Yes, tell her!" the latter said. "It is better than suspense."

And so briefly, jerkily, the boy blurted out his news:

"Phil's back again; but they haven't got the major. The fort was deserted, except for one old man, and they have brought him along. They are over at the colonel's bungalow now."

He paused, shocked by the awful look his tidings had brought into Audrey's eyes.

The next instant she had sprung past him to the open door and was gone, bareheaded and distraught, into the blazing sunshine.

How she covered the distance of long, white road to the colonel's bungalow, Audrey never remembered afterwards. Her agony of mind was too great for her brain to register any impression of physical stress. She only knew that she ran and ran as one runs in a nightmare, till suddenly she was on the veranda of the colonel's bungalow, stumbling, breathless, crying hoarsely for "Phil! Phil!"

He came to her instantly.

"Where is he?" she cried, in high strained tones. "Where is my husband? You promised to bring him back to me! You promised—you promised——"

Her voice failed. She felt choked, as if an iron

hand were slowly, remorselessly, crushing the life out of her panting heart. Thick darkness hovered above her, but she fought it from her wildly, frantically.

"You promised——" She gasped again.

He took her gently by the arm, supporting her.

"Mrs. Tudor," he said very earnestly, "I have done my best."

He led her unresisting into a room close by. The colonel was there, and with him a man in flowing, native garments.

"Mrs. Tudor," said Phil, his hand closing tightly upon her arm, "before you blame me, I want you to speak to this man. He can tell you more about your husband than I can."

He spoke very quietly, very steadily, almost as if he were afraid she might not understand him.

Audrey made an effort to collect her reeling senses. The colonel bent towards her.

"Don't be afraid of him, Mrs. Tudor!" he said kindly. "He is a friend, and he speaks English."

But Audrey did not so much as glance at the native, who stood, silent and impassive, waiting to be questioned. The agony of the past thirty hours had reached its limit. She sank into a chair by the colonel's table and hid her face in her shaking hands.

"I've nothing to ask him," she said hopelessly. "Eustace is dead—dead—dead, without ever knowing how I loved him. Nothing matters now. There is nothing left that ever can matter."

Dead silence succeeded her words, then a quiet movement, then silence again.

She did not look up or stir. Her passion of grief had burnt itself out. She was exhausted mentally and physically.

Minutes passed, but she did not move. What was there to rouse her? There was nothing left. She had no tears to shed. Tears were for small things. This grief of hers was too immense, too infinite for tears.

Only at last something, some inner prompting, stirred her, and as if at the touch of a hand that compelled, she raised her head.

She saw neither the colonel nor Phil, and a sharp prick of wonder pierced her lethargy of despair. She turned in her chair, obedient still to that inner force that compelled. Yes, they had gone. Only the native remained—an old, bent man, who humbly awaited her pleasure. His face was almost hidden in his *chuddah*.

Audrey looked at him.

"There is nothing to wait for," she said at length. "You need not stay."

He did not move. It was as if he had not heard. Her wonder grew into a sort of detached curiosity. What did the man want? She remembered that the colonel had told her that he understood English.

"Is there—something—you wish to say to me?" she asked, and the bare utterance of the words kindled a feeble spark of hope within her, almost in spite of herself.

He turned very slowly.

"Yes, one thing," he said, paused an instant as she sprang to her feet with a great cry, then straightened

himself, pushed the *chuddah* back from his face, and flung out his arms to her passionately.

"Audrey!" he said—"Audrey!"

CHAPTER XIII

HAPPINESS AGAIN

By slow degrees Audrey learnt the story of her husband's escape.

It was Phil's doing in the main, he told her simply, and she understood that but for Phil he would not have taken the trouble. Something Phil had said to him that night had stuck in his mind, and it had finally decided him to make the attempt.

Circumstances had favoured him. Moreover it was by no means the first time that he had been among the Hill tribes in native guise. One sentinel alone had returned to guard the hut after Phil's departure, and this man he had succeeded in overpowering without raising an alarm.

Then, disguising himself once more, he had managed to escape just before the dawn, and had lain hidden for hours among the boulders of the river-bed, fearing to emerge by daylight. But in the evening he had left his hiding-place, and found the fort to be occupied by British troops. The Waris had gone to earth before their advance, and they had found the place deserted.

He had forthwith presented himself in his disguise and had been taken before Phil, the officer-in-command.

"But surely he knew you?"

"Yes, he knew me. But I swore him to secrecy."

She drew a little closer to him.

"Eustace, why?" she whispered.

His arm tightened about her.

"I had to know the truth first," he said.

"Oh!" she murmured. "And now—are you satisfied?"

He bent and kissed her forehead gravely, tenderly.

"I am satisfied," he said.

.

"Well, didn't I tell you so?" laughed Phil, when they shook hands later.

Audrey did not ask him what he meant, for, with all his honesty, Phil could be enigmatical when he chose. Moreover, it really didn't much matter, for, as she tacitly admitted to herself, fond as she was of him, he no longer occupied the place of honour in her thoughts, and she was not vitally interested in him now that the trouble was over.

So when, a few weeks later, Phil cheerily packed his belongings and departed to Poonah, having effected an exchange into the other battalion stationed there, only his major understood why, and was sorry.

THE SWINDLER
AND OTHER STORIES

CONTENTS

THE SWINDLER - - - - -	PAGE II
THE SWINDLER'S HANDICAP - - - - -	32
THE NONENTITY - - - - -	84
HER HERO - - - - -	130
THE EXAMPLE - - - - -	159
THE FRIEND WHO STOOD BY - - - - -	170
THE RIGHT MAN - - - - -	192
THE KNIGHT ERRANT - - - - -	207
A QUESTION OF TRUST - - - - -	257
WHERE THE HEART IS - - - - -	300

THE SWINDLER

WHEN you come to reflect that there are only a few planks between you and the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, it makes you feel sort of pensive."

"I beg your pardon?"

The stranger, smoking his cigarette in the lee of the lee-cabins, turned his head sharply in the direction of the voice. He encountered the wide, unembarrassed gaze of a girl's grey eyes. She had evidently just come up on deck.

"I beg yours," she rejoined composedly. "I thought at first you were some one else."

He shrugged his shoulders, and turned away. Quite obviously he was not disposed to be sociable upon so slender an introduction.

The girl, however, made no move to retreat. She stood thoughtfully tapping on the boards with the point of her shoe.

"Were you playing cards last night down in the saloon?" she asked presently.

"I was looking on."

He threw the words over his shoulder, not troubling to turn.

The girl shivered. The morning air was damp and chill.

"You do a good deal of that, Mr.—Mr. ——" She paused suggestively.

But the man would not fill in the blank. He smoked on in silence.

The vessel was rolling somewhat heavily, and the splash of the drifting foam reached them occasionally where they stood. There were no other ladies in sight.

Suddenly the clear, American voice broke through the man's barrier of silence.

"I know quite well what you are, you know. You may just as well tell me your name as leave me to find it out for myself."

He looked at her then for the first time, keenly, even critically. His clean-shaven mouth wore a very curious expression.

"My name is West," he said, after a moment.

She nodded briskly.

"Your professional name, I suppose. You are a professional, of course?"

His eyes continued to watch her narrowly. They were blue eyes, piercingly, icily blue.

"Why 'of course,' if one may ask?"

She laughed a light, sweet laugh, inexpressibly gay. Cynthia Mortimer could be charmingly inconsequent when she chose.

"I don't think you are a bit clever, you know," she said. "I knew what you were directly I saw you standing by the gangway watching the people coming on board. You looked real professional then, just as if you didn't care a red cent whether you caught your man or not. I knew you did care though, and I was ready to dance when I knew you hadn't got him. Think you'll track him down on our side?"

West turned his eyes once more upon the heaving, grey water, carelessly flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"I don't think," he said briefly. "I know."

"You—know?" The wide eyes opened wider, but they gathered no information from the unresponsive profile that smoked the cigarette. "You know where Mr. Nat Verney is?" she breathed, almost in a whisper. "You don't say! Then—then you weren't really watching out for him at the gangway?"

He jerked up his head with an enigmatical laugh.

"My methods are not so simple as that," he said.

Cynthia joined quite generously in his laugh, notwithstanding its hard note of ridicule. She had become keenly interested in this man, in spite of—possibly in

consequence of—the rebuffs he so unsparingly administered. She was not accustomed to rebuffs, this girl with her delicate, flower-like beauty. They held for her something of the charm of novelty, and abashed her not at all.

“And you really think you’ll catch him?” she questioned, a note of honest regret in her voice.

“Don’t you want him to be caught?”

He pitched his cigarette overboard and turned to her with less of churlishness in his bearing.

She met his eyes quite frankly.

“I should just love him to get away,” she declared, with kindling eyes. “Oh, I know he’s a regular sharper, and he’s swindled heaps of people—I’m one of them, so I know a little about it. He swindled me out of five hundred dollars, and I can tell you I was real mad at first. But now that he is flying from justice, I’m game enough to want him to get away. I reckon my sympathies generally lie with the hare, Mr. West. I’m sorry if it annoys you any, but I was created that way.”

West was frowning, but he smiled with some cynicism over her last remarks.

“Besides,” she continued, “I couldn’t help admiring him some. He has a regular genius for swindling—that man. You’ll agree with me there?”

A sudden heavy roll of the vessel pitched her forward before he could reply. He caught her round the waist, saving her from a headlong fall, and she clung to him, laughing like a child at the mishap.

“I reckon I’ll have to go below,” she decided regretfully. “But you’ve been real good to me, and I’m glad I spoke. I’ve always been kind of prejudiced against detectives till to-day. My cousin Archie—you saw him in the card-room last night—vowed you were nothing half so interesting. Why is it, I wonder, that detectives always look like journalists?” She looked at him with eyes of friendly criticism. “You didn’t deceive me, you see. But then”—ingenuously—“I’m real smart in some ways, much smarter than you’d think. Now you won’t cut me next time we meet, will

you? Because—perhaps—I'm going to ask you to do something for me."

"What do you want me to do?"

The man's voice was hard, his eyes cold as steel, but his question had in it a shade—just a shade—of something warmer than mere curiosity.

She took him into her confidence without an instant's hesitation.

"My cousin Archie—you may have noticed—you were looking on last night—he's a very reckless player, and headstrong too. But he can't afford to lose any, and I don't want him to come to grief. You see, I'm sort of fond of him."

"Well?"

The man's brows were drawn down over his eyes. His expression was not encouraging.

"Well," she proceeded, undismayed, "I saw you looking on, and I reckoned you looked as if you knew a few things. So I thought you'd be a safe person to ask. I can't look after him; and his mother—well, she's worse than useless. But a man—a real strong man like you—is different. Say, if I were to introduce you, couldn't you look after him a bit—just till we get across?"

With much simplicity she made her request, but there was a tinge of anxiety in her eyes. Certainly West staring steadily forth over the grey waste of tumbling waters, looked sufficiently forbidding.

After several seconds of silence he threw an abrupt question:

"Why don't you ask some one else?"

"There is no one else," she answered.

"No one else?" He made a gesture of impatient incredulity.

"No one that I can trust," she explained.

"And you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

"Why?" Again he looked at her with a piercing scrutiny. His eyes held a savage, almost a threatening expression.

But the girl only laughed, lightly and confidently.

"Why? Oh, just because you are trustworthy, I guess. I can't think of any other reason."

West's look relaxed, became abstracted, and finally fell away from her.

"You appear to be a lady of some discernment," he observed dryly.

She proffered her hand impulsively, her eyes dancing.

"My, that's the first pretty thing you've said to me!" she declared flippantly. "I just like you, Mr. West! Shake!"

West was feeling for his cigarette case. He gave her his hand without looking at her, as if her approbation did not greatly gratify him. When she was gone he moved away along the wind-swept deck with his collar up to his ears and his head bent to the gale. His conversation with the American girl had not apparently made him feel any more sociably inclined towards his fellow passengers.

* * * * *

Certainly, as Cynthia had declared, young Archibald Bathurst was an exceedingly reckless player. He lacked the judgment and the cool brain essential to a good card-player, with the result that he lost much more often than he won. But notwithstanding this fact he had a passion for cards which no amount of defeat could abate—a passion which he never failed to indulge whenever an opportunity presented itself.

At the very moment when his cousin was making her petition on his behalf to the surly Englishman on deck, he was seated in the saloon with three or four mer older than himself, playing and losing, playing and losing, with almost unvarying monotony, yet with a feverish relish that had in it something tragic.

He was only three-and-twenty, and, as he was wont to remark, ill-luck dogged him persistently at every turn. He never blamed himself when rash speculation failed, and he never profited by bitter experience. Simply, he was by nature a spendthrift, high-spirited impulsive, weak, with little thought for the future and

none at all for the past. Wherever he went he was popular. His gaiety and spontaneity won him favour. But no one took him very seriously. No one ever dreamed that his ill-luck was a cause for anything but mirth.

A good deal of money had changed hands when the party separated to dine, but, though young Bathurst was as usual a loser, he displayed no depression. Only, as he sauntered away to his cabin, he threw a laughing challenge to those who remained:

"See if I don't turn the tables presently!"

They laughed with him, pursuing him with chaff till he was out of hearing. The boy was a game youngster, and he knew how to lose. Moreover, it was generally believed that he could afford to pay for his pleasures.

But a man who met him suddenly outside his cabin read something other than indifference upon his flushed face. He only saw him for an instant. The next, Archie had swung past and was gone, a clanging door shutting him from sight.

When the little knot of card players re-assembled after dinner their number was augmented. A short, broad-shouldered man, clean-shaven, with piercing blue eyes, had scraped acquaintance with one of them, and had accepted an invitation to join the play. Some surprise was felt among the rest, for this man had till then been disposed to hold aloof from his fellow passengers, preferring a solitary cigarette to any amusements that might be going forward.

A New York man named Rudd muttered to his neighbour that the fellow might be all right, but he had the eyes of a sharper. The neighbour in response murmured the words "private detective," and Rudd was relieved.

Archie Bathurst was the last to arrive, and dropped into the place he had occupied all the afternoon. It was immediately facing the stranger, whom he favoured with a brief and somewhat disparaging stare before settling down to play.

The game was a pure gamble. They played swiftly, and in silence. West seemed to take but slight interest

in the issue, but he won steadily and surely. Young Bathurst, playing feverishly, lost and lost, and lost again. The fortunes of the other four players varied. But always the new-comer won his ventures.

The evening was half over when Archie suddenly and loudly demanded higher stakes, to turn his luck, as he expressed it.

"Double them if you like," said West.

Rudd looked at him with a distrustful eye, and said nothing. The other players were disposed to accede to the boy's vehement request, and after a little discussion the matter was settled to his satisfaction. The game was resumed at higher points.

Some onlookers had drawn round the table scenting excitement. Archie, sitting with his back to the wall, was playing with headlong recklessness. For a while he continued to lose, and then suddenly and most unexpectedly he began to win. A most rash speculation resulted in his favour, and from that moment it seemed that his luck had turned. Once or twice he lost, but these occasions were far outbalanced by several brilliant *coups*. The tide had turned at last in his favour.

He played as a man possessed, swiftly and feverishly. It seemed that he and West were to divide the honours. For West's luck scarcely varied, and Rudd continued to look at him askance.

For the greater part of an hour young Bathurst won with scarcely a break, till the spectators began to chaff him upon his outrageous success.

"You'd better stop," one man warned him. "She's a fickle jade, you know, Bathurst. Take too much for granted, and she'll desert you."

But Bathurst did not even seem to hear. He played with lowered eyes and twitching mouth, and his hands shook perceptibly. The gambler's lust was upon him.

"He'll go on all night," murmured the onlookers.

But this prophecy was not to be fulfilled.

It was a very small thing that stemmed the racing current of the boy's success—no more than a slight click audible only to a few, and the tinkle of something

falling—but in an instant, swift as a thunderbolt, the wings of tragedy swept down upon the little party gathered about the table.

Young Bathurst uttered a queer, half-choked exclamation, and dived downwards. But the man next to him, an Englishman named Norton, dived also, and it was he who, after a moment, righted himself with something shining in his hand which he proceeded grimly to display to the whole assembled company. It was a small folding mirror—little more than a toy, it looked—with a pin attached to its leathern back.

Deliberately Norton turned it over, examining it in such a way that others might examine it too. Then, having concluded his investigation of this very simple contrivance, he slapped it down upon the table with a gesture of unutterable contempt.

"The secret of success," he observed.

Every one present looked at Archie, who had sunk back in his chair white to the lips. He seemed to be trying to say something, but nothing came of it.

And then, quite calmly, ending a silence more terrible than any tumult of words, another voice made itself heard.

"Even so, Mr. Norton." West bent forward, and with the utmost composure possessed himself of the shining thing upon the table. "This is my property. I have been rooking you fellows all the evening."

The avowal was so astounding and made with such complete sang froid that no one uttered a word. Only every one turned from Archie to stare at the man who thus serenely claimed his own.

He proceeded with unvarying coolness to explain himself.

"It was really done as an experiment," he said. "I am not a cardsharp by profession, as some of you already know. But in the course of certain investigations not connected with the matter I now have in hand, I picked this thing up, and, being something of a specialist in certain forms of cheating, I made up my mind to try my hand at this and prove for myself its extreme simplicity. You see how easy it is to swindle, gentlemen,

and the danger to which you expose yourselves. There is no necessity for me to explain the trick further. The instrument speaks for itself. It is merely a matter of dexterity, and keeping it out of sight."

He held it up a second time before his amazed audience, twisted it this way and that, with the air of a conjurer displaying his smartest trick, attached it finally to the lapel of his coat, and rose.

"As a practical demonstration it seems to have acted very well," he remarked. "And no harm done. If you are all satisfied, so am I."

He collected the notes at his elbow with a single careless sweep of the hand, and tossed them into the middle of the table; then, with a brief, collective bow he turned to go. But Rudd, the first to recover from his amazement, sprang impetuously to his feet. "One moment, sir!" he said.

West stopped at once, a cold glint of humour in his eyes. Without a sign of perturbation he faced round, meeting the American's hostile scrutiny calmly, judicially.

"I wish to say," said Rudd, "on behalf of myself, and—I think I may take it—on behalf of these other gentlemen also, that your action was a most dastardly piece of impertinence, to give it its tamest name. Naturally, we don't expect court manners from one of your profession, but we do look for ordinary common honesty. But it seems that we look in vain. You have behaved like a mighty fine skunk, sir. And if you don't see that there's any crying need for a very humble apology, you've got about the thickest hide that ever frayed a horse-whip."

Every one was standing by the time this elaborate threat was uttered, and it was quite obvious that Rudd voiced the general opinion. The only one whose face expressed no indignation was Archie Bathurst. He was leaning against the wall, mopping his forehead with a shaking hand.

No one looked at him. All attention was centred upon West, who met it with a calm serenity suggestive of contempt. He showed himself in no hurry to respond

to Rudd's indictment, and when he did it was not exclusively to Rudd that he spoke.

"I am sorry," he coolly said, "that you consider yourselves aggrieved by my experiment. I do not myself see in what way I have injured you. However, perhaps you are the best judges of that. If you consider an apology due to you, I am quite ready to apologise."

His glance rested for a second upon Archie, then slowly swept the entire assembly. There was scant humility about him, apologise though he might.

Rudd returned his look with open disgust. But it was Norton who replied to West's calm defence of himself.

"It is Bathurst who is the greatest loser," he said, with a glance at that young man, who was beginning to recover from his agitation. "It was a tomfool trick to play, but it's done. You won't get another opportunity for your experiments on board this boat. So—if Bathurst is satisfied—I should say the sooner you apologise and clear out the better."

"We will confiscate this, anyway," declared Rudd, plucking the mirror from West's coat.

He flung it down, and ground his heel upon it with venomous intention. West merely shrugged his shoulders.

"I apologise," he said briefly, "singly and collectively, to all concerned in my experiment, especially"—he made a slight pause—"to Mr. Bathurst, whose run of luck I deeply regret to have curtailed. If Mr. Bathurst is satisfied, I will now withdraw."

He paused again, as if to give Bathurst an opportunity to express an opinion. But Archie said nothing whatever. He was staring down upon the table, and did not so much as raise his eyes.

West shrugged his shoulders again, ever so slightly, and swung slowly upon his heel. In a dead silence he walked away down the saloon. No one spoke till he had gone.

A black, moaning night had succeeded the grey, gusty day. The darkness came down upon the sea like a pall, covering the long, heaving swell from sight—a darkness that wrapped close, such a darkness as could be felt—through which the spray drove blindly.

There was small attraction for passengers on deck, and West grimaced to himself as he emerged from the heated cabins. Yet it was not altogether distasteful to him. He was a man to whom a calm atmosphere meant intolerable stagnation. He was essentially born to fight his way in the world.

For a while he paced alone, to and fro, along the deserted deck, his hands behind him, the inevitable cigarette between his lips. But presently he paused and stood still close to the companion by which he had ascended. It was sheltered here, and he leaned against the woodwork by which Cynthia Mortimer had supported herself that morning, and smoked serenely and meditatively.

Minutes passed. There came the sound of hurrying feet upon the stairs behind him, and he moved a little to one side, glancing downwards.

The light at the head of the companion revealed a man ascending, bareheaded, and in evening dress. His face, upturned, gleamed deathly white. It was the face of Archie Bathurst.

West suddenly squared his shoulders and blocked the opening.

"Go and get an overcoat, you young fool!" he said.

Archie gave a great start, stood a second, then, without a word, turned back and disappeared.

West left his sheltered corner and paced forward across the deck. He came to a stand by the rail, gazing outwards into the restless darkness. There seemed to be the hint of a smile in his intent eyes.

A few more minutes drifted away. Then there fell a step behind him; a hand touched his arm.

"Can I speak to you?" Archie asked.

Slowly West turned.

"If you have anything of importance to say," he said.

Archie faced him with a desperate resolution.

"I want to ask you—I want to know—what in thunder you did it for!"

"Eh?" said West. "Did what?"

He almost drawled the words, as if to give the boy time to control his agitation.

Archie stared at him incredulously.

"You must know what I mean."

"Haven't an idea."

There was just a tinge of contempt this time in the words. What an unconscionable bungler the fellow was!

"But you must!" persisted Archie, blundering wildly. "I suppose you know what you were doing just now when—when——"

"I generally know what I am doing," observed West.

"Then why——"

Archie stumbled again, and fell silent, as if he had hurt himself.

"I don't always care to discuss my motives," said West very decidedly.

"But surely——" Archie suddenly pulled up, realising that by this spasmodic method he was making no headway. "Look here, sir," he said, more quietly "you've done a big thing for me to night—a dashed fine thing! Heaven only knows what you did it for but——"

"I have done nothing whatever for you," said West shortly. "You make a mistake."

"But you'll admit——"

"I admit nothing."

He made as if he would turn on his heel, but Archie caught him by the arm.

"I know I'm a cur," he said. And his voice shook a little. "I don't wonder you won't speak to me. But there are some things that can't be left unsaid. I'm going down now, at once, to tell those fellows what actually happened."

"Then you are going to make a big fool of yourself to no purpose," said West.

He stood still, scanning the boy's face with pitiless eyes. Archie writhed impotently.

"I can't stand it!" he said, with vehemence. "I thought I was blackguard enough to let you do it. But—no doubt I'm a fool, as you say—I find I can't."

"You can't help yourself," said West. He planted himself squarely in front of Archie. "Listen to this!" he said. "You know what I am?"

"They say you are a detective," said Archie.

West nodded.

"Exactly. And, as such, I do whatever suits my purpose without explaining why to the rest of the world. If you are fortunate enough to glean a little advantage from what I do, take it, and be quiet about it. Don't hamper me with your acknowledgments. I assure you I have no more concern for your ultimate fate than those fellows below that you've been swindling all the evening. One thing I will say, though, for your express benefit. You will never make a good, even an indifferently good, gambler. And as to card-sharpping, you've no talent whatever. Better give it up."

His blue eyes looked straight at Archie with a stare that was openly supercilious, and Archie stood abashed.

"You—you are awfully good," he stammered at length.

West's brief laugh lived in his memory for long after. It held an indescribable sting, almost as if the man resented something. Yet the next moment unexpectedly he held out his hand.

"A matter of opinion," he observed dryly. "Good night! Remember what I have said to you."

"I shall never forget it," Archie said earnestly.

He wrung the extended hand hard, waited an instant, then, as West turned from him with that slight characteristic lift of the shoulders, he moved away and went below.

* * * * *

"I'd just like a little talk with you, Mr. West, if I

may." Lightly the audacious voice arrested him, and, as it were, against his will, West stood still.

She was standing behind him in the morning sunshine, her hair blown all about her face, her grey eyes wide and daring, full of an alert friendliness that could not be ignored. She moved forward with her light, free step and stood beside him. West was smoking as usual. His expression was decidedly surly. Cynthia glanced at him once or twice before she spoke.

"You mustn't mind what I'm going to ask you," she said at length gently. "Now, Mr. West, what was it—exactly—that happened in the saloon last night? I reckon you'll tell me by myself if I promise—honest Injun—not to tell again."

"Why should I tell you?" said West, in his brief, unfriendly style.

Cynthia was undaunted. "Because you're a gentleman," she said boldly.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what reason I have given you to say so."

"No?" She looked at him with a funny little smile. "Well then, I just feel it in my bones; and nothing you do or leave undone will make me believe the contrary."

"Much obliged to you," said West. His blue eyes were staring straight out over the sea to the long, blue skyline. He seemed too absorbed in what he saw to pay much attention to the girl beside him.

But she was not to be shaken off. "Mr. West," she began again, breaking in upon his silence, "do you know what they are saying about you to-day?"

"Haven't an idea."

"No," she said. "And I don't suppose you care either. But I care. It matters a lot to me."

"Don't see how," threw in West.

He turned in his abrupt, disconcerting way, and gave her a piercing look. She averted her face instantly, but he had caught her unawares.

"Good heavens!" he said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she returned, with a sort of choked vehemence. "There's nothing the matter with me."

Only I'm feeling badly about—about what I asked you to do yesterday. I'd sooner have lost every dollar I have in the world, if I had only known, than—than have you do—what you did."

"Good heavens!" West said again.

He waited a little then, looking down at her as she leaned upon the rail with downcast face. At length, as she did not raise her head, he addressed her for the first time on his own initiative:

"Miss Mortimer!"

She made a slight movement to indicate that she was listening, but she remained gazing down into the green and white of the racing water.

Unconsciously he moved a little nearer to her. "There is no occasion for you to feel badly," he said. "I had my own reasons for what I did. It doesn't much matter what they were. But let me tell you for your comfort that neither socially nor professionally has it done me any harm."

"They are all saying: 'Set a thief to catch a thief,'" she interposed, with something like a sob in her voice.

"They can say what they like."

West's tone expressed the most stoical indifference, but she would not be comforted.

"If only I hadn't asked you to!" she murmured.

He made his peculiar, shrugging gesture. "What does it matter? Moreover, what you asked of me was something quite apart from this. It had nothing whatever to do with it."

She stood up sharply at that, and faced him with burning eyes. "Oh, don't tell me that lie!" she exclaimed passionately. "I'm not such a child as to be taken in by it. You don't deceive me any, Mr. West. I know as well as you do—better—that the man who did the swindling last night was not you. And I'm sick—I'm downright sick—whenever I think of it!"

West's expression changed slightly as he looked at her. He seemed to regard her as a doctor regards the patient for whom he contemplates a change of treatment.

"See here," he abruptly said. "You are distressing yourself all to no purpose. If you will promise to keep it secret, I'll tell you the facts of the case."

Cynthia's face changed also. She caught eagerly at the suggestion. "Yes!" she said. "Yes! I promise, of course. And I'm quite trustworthy."

"I believe you are," he said, with a grim smile. "Well, the fact of the matter is this. The man we want is on board this ship, but being only a private detective, I don't possess a warrant for his arrest. Therefore, all I can do is to keep him in sight. And I can only do that by throwing him as far as possible off the scent. If he takes me for a card-sharper, all the better. For he's as slippery as an eel, and I have to play him pretty carefully."

He ceased. Cynthia's eyes were growing wider and wider.

"Nat Verney on board this ship?" she gasped.

He nodded.

"Yes. You wanted him to get away, didn't you? But I don't think he will, this time. He will probably be arrested directly we reach New York. But, meantime, I must watch out."

"Oh!" breathed Cynthia. "Then"—with sudden hope dawning in her eyes—"it really was your doing, that trick at the card-table last night?"

West uttered his brief, hard laugh.

"What do you take me for?"

She heaved a great sigh of relief.

"And it wasn't Archie, after all? I'm thankful you told me. I thought—I thought— But it doesn't matter, does it? Tell me, do tell me, Mr. West," drawing very close to him, "which—which is Mr. Nat Verney?"

West seemed to hesitate.

"Oh, do tell me!" she begged. "I know I'm only a woman, but I always keep my word. And it's only two days more to New York."

He looked closely into her eyes and yielded.

"I'm trusting you with my reputation," he said. "It's the stout, red-faced man called Ruddy."

"Mr. Rudd?" She started back. "You don't say? That man?" There followed a short pause while she digested the information. Then, as on the previous morning, she suddenly extended her hand. "Well, I hate that man, anyway. And I reckon you're real smart. If you like, Mr. West, I'll help you to watch out."

"Thanks!" said West. He took the little hand into a tight grip, still looking straight into her eyes. There was a light in his own that shone like a blue flame. "Thanks!" he said again, as he released it. "You're very good, Miss Mortimer. But you mustn't be seen with me, you know. You've got to remember that I'm a swindler."

The girl laughed aloud. It pleased her to feel that this taciturn man had taken her into his confidence at last. "I shall remember," she said lightly.

And she went away, not only comforted, but gay of heart.

* * * * *

During the remainder of the voyage, West was treated with extreme coolness by every one. It did not seem to abash him in the least. He came and went in the crowd with the utmost sang-froid, always preoccupied, always self-contained. Cynthia observed him from a distance with admiration. The man had taken her fancy. She was keenly interested in his methods, as well as in his decidedly unusual personality. She observed Rudd also, and noted the obvious suspicion with which he regarded West. On the night before their arrival she saw the latter alone for a moment, and whispered to him that Mr. Rudd seemed uneasy. At which information West merely laughed sardonically. He was holding a small parcel, to which, after a moment, he drew her attention.

"I was going to ask you to accept this," he said. "It is nothing very important, but I should like you to have it. Don't open it before to-morrow."

"What is it?" asked Cynthia, in surprise.

He frowned in his abrupt way.

"It doesn't matter; something connected with my profession. I shouldn't give it to you, if I didn't know you were to be trusted."

"But—but"—she hesitated a little—"ought I to take it?"

He raised his shoulders.

"I shall give it to the captain for you, if you don't. But I would rather give it to you direct."

In face of this, Cynthia yielded, feeling as if he compelled her.

"But mayn't I open it?"

"No." West's eyes held hers for a second. "Not till to-morrow. And, in case we don't meet again, I'll say good-bye."

"But we shall meet in New York?" she urged, with a sudden sense of loss. "Or p'raps in Boston? My father would be real pleased to meet you."

"Much obliged," said West, with his grim smile. "But I'm not much of a society man. And I don't think I shall find myself in Boston at present."

"Then—then—I shan't see you again ever?" Cynthia's tone was unconsciously tragic. Till that moment she had scarcely realised how curiously strong an attraction this man held for her.

West's expression changed. His emotionless blue eyes became suddenly more blue, and intense with a vital fire. He leaned towards her as one on the verge of vehement speech.

Then abruptly his look went beyond her, and he checked himself.

"Who knows?" he said carelessly. "Good-bye for the present, anyway! It's been a pleasant voyage."

He straightened himself with the words, nodded, and turned aside without so much as touching her hand.

And Cynthia, glancing round with an instinctive feeling of discomfiture, saw Kudd with another man, standing watching them at the end of the passage.

* * * * *

In the dark of early morning they reached New York.

Most of the passengers decided to remain on board for breakfast, which was served at an early hour in the midst of a hubbub and turmoil indescribable.

Cynthia, with her aunt and Archie, partook of a hurried meal in the thick of the ever-shifting crowd. She looked in vain for West, her grey eyes searching perpetually.

One friend after another came up to bid them good-bye, stood a little, talking, and presently drifted away. The whole ship from end to end hummed like a hive of bees.

She was glad when at length she was able to escape from the noisy saloon. She had not slept well, and her nerves were on edge. The memory of that interrupted conversation with West, of the confidence unspoken, went with her continually. She had an almost feverish longing to see him once more, even though it were in the heart of the crowd. He had been about to tell her something. Of that she was certain. She had an intense, an almost passionate desire to know what it was. Surely he would not—he could not—go ashore without seeing her again!

She had not intended to open the packet he had given her till she was ashore herself, but a palpitating curiosity tugged ever at her resolution till at length she could resist it no longer. West was nowhere to be seen, and she felt she must know more. It was intolerable to be thus left in the dark. Through the scurrying multitude of departing passengers, she began to make her way back to her cabin. Her progress was of necessity slow, and once in a crowded corner she was stopped altogether.

Two men were talking together close to her. Their backs were towards her, and in the general confusion they did not observe her futile impatience to pass.

"Oh, I knew the fellow was a wrong 'un, all along," were the first words that filtered to the girl's consciousness as she stood. "But I didn't think he was responsible for the card trick, I must say. Young Bathurst looked so abominably hang-dog."

It was the Englishman, Norton, who spoke, and

the man who stood with him was Rudd. Cynthia realised the near presence of the latter with a sensation of disgust. His drawling tones grated upon her intolerably.

"Waal," he said, "it was just that card trick that opened my eyes—I shouldn't have noticed him, otherwise. I knew that young Bathurst was square. He hasn't the brains to be anything else. And when this chap butted in with his thick ribbed impudence, I guessed right then that we hadn't got a beginner to deal with. After that I watched for a bit, and there were several little things that made me begin to reflect. So the next evening I got a wireless message off to my partner in New York, and I reckon that did the trick. When we came up alongside this morning, the vultures were all ready for him. I took them to his cabin myself. There was no fuss at all. He saw it was all up, and gave in without a murmur. They were only just in time though. In another thirty seconds, he would have been off. It was a real smart piece of work, I flatter myself, to net Mr. Nat Verney so neatly."

The Englishman began to laugh, but suddenly broke off short as a girl's face, white and quivering, came between them.

"Who is this man?" the high, breathless voice demanded. "Which—which is Mr. Nat Verney?"

Rudd looked down at her through narrowed eyes. He was smiling—a small, bitter smile.

"Waal, Miss Mortimer," he began, "I reckon you have first right to know—"

She turned from him imperiously.

"You tell me," she commanded Norton.

Norton looked genuinely uncomfortable, and, probably in consequence, he answered her with a gruffness that sounded brutal.

"It was West. He has been arrested. His own fault entirely. No one would have suspected him if he hadn't been a fool, and given his own show away."

"He wasn't a fool!" Cynthia flashed back fiercely. "He was my friend!"

"I shouldn't be in too great a hurry to claim tha

distinction," remarked Rudd. "He's about the best-known rascal in the two hemispheres."

But Cynthia did not wait to hear him. She had slipped past, and was gone.

In her own cabin at last, she bolted the door and tore open that packet connected with his profession which he had given her the night before. It contained a roll of notes to the value of a hundred pounds, wrapped in a sheet of notepaper on which was scrawled a single line: "With apologies from the man who swindled you."

There was no signature of any sort. None was needed! When Cynthia finally left her cabin an hour later, her eyes were bright with that brightness which comes from the shedding of many tears.

THE SWINDLER'S HANDICAP

A SEQUEL TO "THE SWINDLER"

Which I Dedicate to the Friend Who Asked for it

I

"YES, but what's the good of it?" said Cynthia Mortimer gently. "I can never marry you."

"You might be engaged to me for a bit, anyhow," he urged, "and see how you like it."

She made a quaint gesture with her arms, as though she tried to lift some heavy weight.

"I am very sorry," she said, in the same gentle voice. "It's real nice of you to think of it, Lord Babbacombe. But—you see, I'm quite sure I shouldn't like it. So that ends it, doesn't it?"

He stood up to his full height, and regarded her with a faint, rueful smile.

"You're a very obstinate girl, Cynthia," he said.

She leaned back in her chair, looking up at him with clear, grey eyes that met his with absolute freedom.

"I'm not a girl at all, Jack," she said. "I gave up all my pretensions to youth many, many years ago."

He nodded, still faintly smiling.

"You were about nineteen, weren't you?"

"No. I was past twenty-one." A curious note crept into her voice; it sounded as if she were speaking of the dead. "It—was just twelve years ago," she said.

Babbacombe's eyebrows went up.

"What! Are you past thirty? I had no idea."

She laughed at him—a quick, gay laugh.

"Why, it's eight years since I first met you."

"Is it? Great heavens, how the time goes—wasted time, too, Cynthia! We might have been awfully happy together all this time. Well"—with a sharp sigh—"we can't get it back again. But anyhow, we needn't squander any more of it, if only you will be reasonable."

She shook her head: then, with one of those quick impulses that were a part of her charm, she sprang lightly up and gave him both her hands.

"No, Jack," she said. "No—no—no! I'm not reasonable. I'm just a drivelling, idiotic fool. But—but I love my foolishness too well ever to part with it. Ever, did I say? No, even I am not quite so foolish as that. But it's sublime enough to hold me till—till I know for certain whether—whether the thing I call love is real or—or—only—a sham."

There was passion in her voice, and her eyes were suddenly full of tears; but she kept them upturned to his as though she pleaded with him to understand.

He looked down at her very kindly, very steadily, holding her hands closely in his own. There was no hint of chagrin on his clean-shaven face—only the utmost kindness.

"Don't cry!" he said gently. "Tell me about this sublime foolishness of yours—about the thing you call—love. I might help you, perhaps—who knows?—to find out if it is the real thing or not."

Her lips were quivering.

"I've never told a soul," she said. "I—am half afraid."

"Nonsense, dear!" he protested.

"But I am," she persisted. "It's such an absurd romance—this of mine, so absurd that you'll laugh at it, just at first. And then—afterwards—you will—disapprove."

"My dear girl," he said, "you have never entertained the smallest regard for my opinion before. Why begin to-day?"

She laughed a little, turning from him to brush away her tears.

"Sit down," she said, "and— and smoke—those horrid, strong cigarettes of yours. I love the smell. P'r'aps I'll try and tell you. But—mind, Jack—you're not to look at me. And you're not to say a single word till I've done. Just—smoke, that's all."

She settled herself on the low fender-cushion with her face turned from him to the fire. Lord Babbacombe sat down as she desired, and took out and lighted a cigarette.

As the scent of it reached her she began to speak in the high, American voice he had come to love. There was nothing piercing about it; it was a clear, sweet treble.

"It happened when I was travelling under Aunt Bathurst's wing. You know, it was with her and my cousin Archie that I first did Europe. My! It was a long time ago! I've been round the world four times since then—twice with poor dear Poppa, once with Mrs Archie, after he died, and the last time alone. And didn't like that last time a mite. I was like the man in 'The Pilgrim's Progress'—I took my hump wherever I went. Still, I had to do something. You were big game shooting. I'd have gone with you if you'd have had me unmarried. But I knew you wouldn't, so I just had to mess around by myself. Oh, shucks, I was tired—I was tired! But I kept saying to myself it was the last journey before—Jack, if you don't pull soon your weed will go out. Where was I? I'm afraid I'm boring you. You can go to sleep if you like. Well, I was on the voyage back. There was a man on board that every one said was a private detective. It was at the time of the great Nat Verney swindles. You remember, of course? And somehow we all jumped to the conclusion that he was tracking him. I remember seeing him when we first went on board at Liverpool. He was standing by the gangway watching the crowd with the bluest eyes on earth, and I took him for a detective right away. But—for all that—there was something about him—something I kind of liked, that made me feel I wanted to know him. He was avoiding every body, but I made him talk to me. You know my way."

She paused for a moment, and leaning forward, gazed into the heart of the fire with wide, intent eyes.

The man in the chair behind her smoked on silently with a drawn face.

"He was very horrid to me," she went on, her voice soft and slow as though she were describing something seen in a vision, "the only man who ever was. But I—do you know, I liked him all the more for that? I didn't flirt with him. I didn't try. He wasn't the sort one could flirt with. He was hard—hard as iron, clean-shaven, with an immensely powerful jaw, and eyes that looked clean through you. He was one of those short, broad Englishmen—you know the sort—out of proportion everywhere, but so splendidly strong. He just hated me for making friends with him. It was real funny."

An odd little note of laughter ran through the words—that laughter which is akin to tears.

"But I didn't care for that," she said. "It didn't hurt me in the least. He was too big to give offence to an impudent little minx like me. Besides, I wanted him to help me, and after a bit I told him so. Archie—my cousin, you know; he was only a boy then—was mad on card playing at that time. And I was real worried about him. I knew he would get into a hole sooner or later, and I begged my surly Englishman to keep an eye on him. Oh, I was a fool! I was a brainless, chattering fool! And I'm not much better now, I often think."

Cynthia's hand went up to her eyes. The vision in the fire was all blurred and indistinct.

Babbacombe was leaning forward, listening intently. The firelight flickered on his face, showing it very grave and still. He did not attempt to speak.

Nevertheless, after a moment, Cynthia made a wavering movement with one hand in his direction.

"I'm not crying, Jack. Don't be silly! I'm sure your cigarette is out."

It was. He pitched it past her into the fire.

"Light another," she pleaded. "I love them so. They are the kind he always smoked. That's nearly

the end of the story. You can almost guess the rest. That very night Archie did get into a hole, a bad one, and the only way my friend could lift him out was by getting down into it himself. He saved him, but it was at his own expense; for it made people begin to reflect. And in the end—in the end, when we came into harbour, they came on board, and—and arrested him early in the morning—before I knew. You see, he—he was Nat Verney."

Cynthia's dark head was suddenly bowed upon her hands. She was rocking to and fro in the firelight.

"And it was my fault," she sobbed—"all my fault. If—if he hadn't done that thing for me, no one would have known—no one would have suspected!"

She had broken down completely at last, and the man who heard her wondered, with a deep compassion, how often she had wept, in secret and uncomplained, as she was weeping now.

He bore it till his humanity could endure no longer. And then, very gently, he reached out, touched her, drew her to him, pillowed her head on his shoulder.

"Don't cry, Cynthia," he whispered earnestly. "It's heart-breaking work, dear, and it doesn't help. There! Let me hold you till you feel better. You can't refuse comfort from an old friend like me."

She yielded to him mutely for a little, till her grief had somewhat spent itself. Then, with a little quivering smile, she lifted her head and looked him straight in the face.

"Thank you, Jack," she said. "You—you've done me good. But it's not good for you, is it? I've made you quite damp. You don't think you'll catch cold?"—dabbing at his shoulder with her handkerchief.

He took her hand and stayed it.

"There is nothing in this world," he said gravely, "that I would so gladly do as help you, Cynthia. Will you believe this, and treat me from this standpoint only?"

She turned back to the fire, but she left her hand in his.

"My dear," she said, in an odd little choked voice,

"it's just like you to say so, and I guess I shan't forget it. Well, well! There's my romance in a nutshell. He didn't care a fig for me till just the last. He cared then, but it was too late to come to anything. They shipped him back again, you know, and he was sentenced to fifteen years' penal servitude. He's done nearly twelve, and he's coming out next month on ticket-of-leave."

"Oh, Cynthia!"

Babbacombe bent his head suddenly upon her hand, and sat tense and silent.

"I know," she said—"I know. It sounds simply monstrous, put into bald words. I sometimes wonder myself if it can possibly be true—if I, Cynthia Mortimer, can really be such a fool. But I can't possibly tell for certain till I see him again. I must see him again somehow. I've waited all these years—all these years."

Babbacombe groaned.

"And suppose, when you've seen him, you still care?"

She shook her head.

"What then, Jack? I don't know; I don't know."

He pulled himself together, and sat up.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes. He is at Barren Hill. He has been there for five years now. My solicitor knows that I take an interest in him. He calls it philanthropy." Cynthia smiled faintly into the fire. "I was one of the people he swindled," she said. "But he paid me back."

She rose and went across the room to a bureau in a corner. She unlocked a drawer, and took something from it. Returning, she laid a packet of notes in Babbacombe's hands.

"I could never part with them," she said. "He gave them to me in a sealed parcel the last time I saw him. It's only a hundred pounds. Yes, that was the message he wrote. Can you read it? 'With apologies from the man who swindled you.' As if I cared for the wretched money!"

Babbacombe frowned over the writing in silence.

"Why don't you say what you think, Jack?" she

said. "Why don't you call him a thieving scoundrel and me a poor, romantic fool!"

"I am trying to think how I can help you," he answered quietly. "Have you any plans?"

"No, nothing definite," she said. "It is difficult to know what to do. He knows one thing—that he has a friend who will help him when he comes out. He will be horribly poor, you know, and I'm so rich. But, of course, I would do it anonymously. And he thinks his friend is a man."

Babbacombe pondered with drawn brows.

"Cynthia," he said slowly, at length, "suppose I take this matter into my own hands, suppose I make it possible for you to see this man once more, will you be guided entirely by me? Will you promise me solemnly to take no rash step of any description; in short, to do nothing without consulting me? Will you promise me, Cynthia?"

He spoke very earnestly. The firelight showed her the resolution on his face.

"Of course I will promise you, Jack," she said instantly. "I would trust myself body and soul in your keeping. But what can you do?"

"I might do this," he said. "I might pose as his unknown friend—another philanthropist, Cynthia." He smiled rather grimly. "I might get hold of him when he comes out, give him something to do to keep his head above water. If he has any manhood in him, he won't mind what he takes. And I might—later, if I thought it practicable—I only say 'if,' Cynthia, for after many years of prison life a man isn't always fit company for a lady—I might arrange that you should see him in some absolutely casual fashion. If you consent to this arrangement you must leave that entirely to me."

"But you will hate to do it!" she exclaimed.

He rose. "I will do it for your sake," he said. "I shall not hate it if it makes you see things—as they are."

"Oh, but you are good," she said tremulously—"you are good!"

"I love a good woman," he answered gravely.
And with that he turned and left her alone in the
irelight with her romance.

II

It was early on a dark November day that the prison
gate at Barren Hill opened to allow a convict who had
just completed twelve years' penal servitude to pass out
a free man.

A motor-car was drawn up at the side of the kerb as
he emerged, and a man in a long overcoat, with another
slung on his arm, was pacing up and down.

He wheeled at the closing of the gate, and they stood
face to face.

There was a moment's difficult silence; then the
man with the motor spoke.

"Mr. West, I think?"

The other looked him up and down in a single com-
prehensive glance that was like the flash of a sword
blade.

"Certainly," he said curtly, "if you prefer it."

He was a short, thick-set man of past forty, with a
face so grimly lined as to mask all expression. His eyes
alone were vividly alert. They were the bluest eyes
that Babbacombe had even seen.

He accepted the curt acknowledgment with grave
courtesy, and made a motion toward the car.

"Will you get in? My name is Babbacombe. I am
here to meet you, as no doubt you have been told.
You had better wear this"—opening out the coat he
carried.

But West remained motionless, facing him on the
grey, deserted road. "Before I come with you," he
said, in his brief, clipped style, "there is one thing I
want to know. Are you patronising me for the sake of
philanthropy, or for some other reason?"

As he uttered the question, he fixed Babbacombe
with a stare that was not without insolence.

Babbacombe did not hesitate in his reply. He was not a man to be lightly disconcerted.

"You can put it down to anything you like," he said, "except philanthropy."

West considered a moment.

"Very well, sir," he said finally, his aggressive tone slightly modified. "In that case I will come with you."

He turned about, and thrust his arms into the coat Babbacombe held for him, turned up the collar, and without a backward glance, stepped into the waiting motor.

Babbacombe started the engine, and followed him. In another moment they had glided away into the dripping mist, and the prison was left behind.

Through mile after mile they sped in silence. West sat with his chin buried in his coat, his keen eye staring straight ahead. Babbacombe, at the wheel never glanced at him once.

Through villages, through towns, through long stretches of open country they glided, sometimes slackening, but never stopping. The sun broke through a length, revealing a country of hills and woods and silvery running streams. They had been travelling for hours. It was nearly noon.

For the first time since their start Babbacombe spoke. "I hope I haven't kept you going too long. We are just getting in."

"Don't mind me," said West.

Babbacombe was slackening speed.

"It's a fine hunting country," he observed.

"Whose is it?" asked West.

"Mine, most of it." They were running smoothly down a long avenue of beech trees, with a glimpse of an open gateway at the end.

"It must take some managing," remarked West.

"It does," Babbacombe answered. "It needs a capable man."

They reached the gateway, passing under an arch of stone. Beyond it lay wide stretches of park land. Rabbits scuttled in the sunshine, and under the trees here and there they had glimpses of deer.

"Ever ridden to hounds?" asked Babbacombe. The man beside him turned with a movement half

savage.

"Set me on a good horse," he said, "and I will show you what I can do."

Babbacombe nodded, conscious for the first time of a warmth of sympathy for the man. Whatever his sins, he must have suffered infernally during the past twelve years.

Twelve years! Ye gods! It was half a lifetime! It represented the whole of his manhood to Babbacombe. Twelve years ago he had been an undergraduate at Cambridge.

He drove on through the undulating stretches of Farringdean Park, his favourite heritage, trying to realise what effect twelve years in a convict prison would have had upon himself, what his outlook would ultimately have become, and what in actual fact was the outlook and general attitude of the man who had come through this long purgatory.

Sweeping round a rise in the ground, they came into sudden sight of the castle. Ancient and splendid it rose before them, its battlements shining in the sun—a heritage of which any man might be proud.

Babbacombe waited for some word of admiration from his companion. But he waited in vain. West was mute.

"What do you think of it?" he asked at last, determined to wring some meed of appreciation from him even though he stooped to ask for it.

"What—the house?" said West. "It's uncommonly like a primeval sort of prison, to my idea. I've no doubt it boasts some very superior dungeons."

The sting in the words reached Babbacombe, but without offence. Again, more strongly, he was conscious of that glow of sympathy within him, kindling to a flame of fellowship.

"It boasts better things than that," he said quietly "as I hope you will allow me to show you."

He was conscious of the piercing gaze of West's eye

and, after a moment, he deliberately turned his own to meet it.

"And if you find—as you probably soon will—that I make but a poor sort of host," he said, "just remember, will you, that I like my guests to please themselves, and secure your own comfort?"

For a second, West's grim mouth seemed to hesitate on the edge of a smile—a smile that never developed.

"I wonder how soon you will tell me to go to the devil?" he said cynically.

"Oh, I am a better host than that," said Babbacombe, with quiet humour. "If you ever prefer the devil's hospitality to mine, it won't be my fault."

West turned from him with a slight shrug of the shoulders, as if he deemed himself to be dealing with a harmless lunatic, and dropped back into silence.

III

Silence had become habitual to him, as Babbacombe soon discovered. He could remain silent for hours. Probably he had never been of a very expansive nature, and prison discipline had strengthened an inborn reticence to a reserve of iron. He was not a disconcerting companion, because he was absolutely unobtrusive, but with all the goodwill in the world Babbacombe found it well-nigh impossible to treat him with that ease of manner which came to him so spontaneously in his dealings with other men.

Grim, taciturn, cynical, West baffled his every effort to reach the inner man. His silence clothed him like armour, and he never really emerged from it save when a fiendish sense of humour tempted him. This, and this alone, so it seemed to Babbacombe, had any power to draw him out. And the instant he had flung his gibe at the object thereof, he would retreat again into that impenetrable shell of silence. He never once spoke of his past life, never once referred to the future.

He merely accepted Babbacombe's hospitality in

absolute silence, without question, without gratitude, smoked his cigarettes eternally, drank his wines without appreciation, rode his horses without comment.

The only point in his favour that Babbacombe, the kindest of critics, could discover after a fortnight's patient study, was that the animals loved him. He conducted himself like a gentleman, but somehow Babbacombe had expected this much from the moment of their meeting. He sometimes told himself with a wry face that if the fellow had behaved like a beast he would have found him easier to cultivate. At least, he would have had something to work upon, a creature of flesh and blood, instead of this inscrutable statue wrought in iron.

With a sinking heart he recalled Cynthia's description of the man. To a certain extent it still fitted him, but he imagined that those twelve years had had a hardening effect upon him, making rigid that which had always been stubborn, driving the iron deeper and ever deeper into his soul, till only iron remained. Many were the nights he spent pondering over the romance of the woman he loved. What subtle attraction in this hardened sinner had lured her heart away? Was it possible that the fellow had ever cared for her? Had he ever possessed even the rudiments of a heart?

The message he had read in the firelight—the brief line which this man had written—was the only answer he could find to these doubts. It seemed to point to something—some pulsing warmth—which could not have been kindled from nothing. And again the memory of a woman's tears would come upon him, spurring him to fresh effort. Surely the man for whom she was breaking her heart could not be wholly evil, nor yet wholly callous! Somewhere behind those steely blue eyes, there must dwell some answer to the riddle. It might be that Cynthia would find it, though he failed. But he shrank, with an aversion inexpressible, from letting her try, so deeply rooted had his conviction become that her cherished girlish fancy was no more than the misty gold of dreams.

Yet for her sake he persevered—for the sake of those

precious tears that had so wrung his heart, he would do that which he had set out to do, notwithstanding the utmost discouragement. An insoluble enigma the man might be to him, but he would not for that turn back from the task that he had undertaken. West should have his chance, in spite of it.

They were riding together over the crisp turf of the park one frosty morning in November, when Babbacombe turned quietly to his companion, pointing to the chimneys of a house half hidden by trees, ahead of them.

"I want to go over that place," he said. "It is standing empty, and probably needs repairs."

West received the announcement with a brief nod. He never betrayed interest in anything.

"Shall I hold your animal?" he suggested, as they reached the gate that led into the little garden.

"No. Come in with me, won't you? We can hitch the bridles to the post."

They went in together through a rustling litter of dead leaves. The house was low, and thatched—a picturesque dwelling of no great size.

Babbacombe led the way within, and they went from room to room, he with notebook in hand, jotting down the various details necessary to make the place into a comfortable habitation.

"I dare say you can help me with this if you will," he said presently. "I shall turn some workmen on to it next week. Perhaps you will keep an eye on them for me, decide on the decorations, and so forth. It is my agent's house, you know."

"Where is your agent?" asked West abruptly.

Babbacombe smiled a little. "At the present moment—I have no agent. That is what keeps me so busy. I hope to have one before long."

West strolled to a window and opened it, leaning his arms upon the sill.

He seemed about to relapse into one of his interminable silences when Babbacombe, standing behind him, said quietly, "I am going to offer the post to you."

"To me?" West wheeled suddenly, even with vehemence. "What for?" he demanded sharply.

Babbacombe met his look, still faintly smiling. "For our mutual benefit," he said. "I am convinced that you have ample ability for this sort of work, and if you will accept the post I shall be very pleased."

He stopped at that, determined for once to make the man speak on his own initiative. West was looking straight at him, and there was a curious glitter in his eyes like the sparkle of ice in the sun.

When he spoke at length his speech, though curt, was not so rigorously emotionless as usual.

"Don't you think," he said, "that you have carried this tomfoolery of yours far enough?"

Babbacombe raised one eyebrow. "Meaning?" he questioned.

West enlightened him with most unusual vigour. "Meaning that tomfoolery of this sort never pays. I know. I've done it myself in my time. If I were you, I should pull up and try some less expensive hobby than that of mending broken men. The pieces are always chipped and never stick, and the chances are that you'll cut your fingers trying to make 'em. No, sir, I won't be your agent! Find a man you can trust, and let me go to the devil!"

The outburst was so unexpected and so forcible that at first Babbacombe stared at the man in amazement. Then, with that spontaneous kindness of heart that made him what he was, he grabbed and held his opportunity.

"My dear fellow," he said, not pausing for a choice of words, "you are talking infernal rot, and I won't listen to you. Do you seriously suppose I should be such a tenfold ass as to offer the management of my estate to a man I couldn't trust?"

"What reason have you for trusting me?" West thrust back. "Unless you think that a dozen years in prison have deprived me of my ancient skill. Would you choose a man who has been a drunkard for your butler? No! Then don't choose a swindler and an ex-convict for your bailiff."

He swung around with the words and shut the window with a bang.

But again Babbacombe took his cue from that inner prompting to which he had trusted all his life. For the first time he liked the man; for the first time, so it seemed to him, he caught a glimpse of the soul into which the iron had been so deeply driven.

"Look here, West," he said, "I am not going to take that sort of refusal from you. We have been together some time now, and it isn't my fault if we don't know each other pretty well. I don't care a hang what you have been. I am only concerned with what you are, and whatever that may be, you are not a weak-kneed fool. You have the power to keep straight if you choose, and you are to choose. Understand? I make you this offer with a perfectly open mind, and you are to consider it in the same way. Would you have said because you had once had a nasty tumble that you would never ride again? Of course you wouldn't. You are not such a fool. Then don't refuse my offer on those grounds, for it's nothing less than contemptible."

"Think so?" said West. He had listened quite impassively to the oration, but as Babbacombe ended, his grim mouth relaxed sardonically. "You seem mighty anxious to spend your money on damaged goods, Lord Babbacombe. It's a temerous investment, you know. How many of the horses talk in your service will stick to you when they begin to find out what you've given them?"

"Why should they find out?" asked Babbacombe.

West shrugged his shoulders. "It's a dead certainty that they will."

"If I can take the risk, so can you," said Babbacombe.

"Oh, of course, I used to be rather good at that game. It is called 'sand-throwing' in the profession."

Babbacombe made an impatient movement, and West's hard smile became more pronounced.

"But you are not at all good at it," he continued. "You are almost obtrusively obvious. It is a charm that has its very material drawbacks."

Babbacombe wholly lost patience at that. The man's grim irony was not to be borne.

"Take it or leave it!" he exclaimed. "But if you leave it, in heaven's name let it be for some sounder reason than a faked-up excuse of moral weakness!"

West uttered an abrupt laugh. "You seem to have a somewhat exalted opinion of my morals," he observed. "Well, since you are determined to brave the risk of being let down, I needn't quibble at it any further. I accept."

Babbacombe's attitude changed in an instant. He held out his hand.

"You won't let me down, West," he said, with confidence.

West hesitated for a single instant, then took the proffered hand into a grip of iron. His blue eyes looked hard and straight into Babbacombe's face.

"If I let you down," he said grimly, "I shall be underneath."

IV

It was not till the middle of December that the new bailiff moved into his own quarters, but he had assumed his duties some weeks before that time, and Babbacombe was well satisfied with him. The man's business instincts were unusually keen. He had, moreover, a wonderful eye for details, and very little escaped him. It soon came home to Babbacombe that the management of his estate was in capable hands, and he congratulated himself upon having struck ore where he had least expected to find it. He supervised the whole of West's work for a time, but he soon suffered this vigilance to relax, for the man's shrewdness far surpassed his own. He settled to the work with a certain grim relish, and it was a perpetual marvel to Babbacombe that he mastered it from the outset with such facility.

Keepers and labourers eyed him askance for awhile, but West's imperturbability took effect before very long. They accepted him without enthusiasm, but also without rancour, as a man who could hold his own.

As soon as he was installed in the bailiff's house, Babbacombe left him to his own devices, and departed upon a round of visits. He proposed to entertain a house-party himself towards the end of January. He informed West of this before departing, and was slightly puzzled by a certain humorous gleam that shone in the steady eyes at the news. The matter went speedily from his mind. It was not till long after that he recalled it.

West wrote to him regularly during his absence, curt, businesslike epistles, which always terminated on a grim note of irony: "Your faithful steward, N. V. WEST." He never varied this joke, and Babbacombe usually noted it with a faint frown. The fellow was not a bad sort, he was convinced, but he would always be more or less of an enigma to him.

He returned to Farringham in the middle of January with one of his married sisters, whom he had secured to act as hostess to his party. He invited West to dine with them informally on the night of his return.

His sister, Lady Cottesbrook, a gay and garrulous lady some years his senior, received the new agent with considerable condescension. She bestowed scant attention upon him during dinner, and West presented his most impenetrable demeanour in consequence, refusing steadily to avail himself of Babbacombe's courteous efforts to draw him into the conversation.

He would have excused himself later from accompanying his host into the drawing-room, but Babbacombe insisted upon this so stubbornly that finally, with his characteristic lift of the shoulders, he yielded.

As they entered, Lady Cottesbrook raised her glasses, and favoured him with a close scrutiny.

"It's very curious," she said, "but I can't help feeling as if I have seen you somewhere before. You have the look of some one I knew years ago—some one I didn't like—but I can't remember who."

"Just as well, perhaps," said Babbacombe, with a careless laugh, though a faint flush of annoyance rose in his face. "Come over here, West. You can smoke. My sister likes it."

He seated himself at the piano, indicated a chair near him to his guest, and began to play.

West, with his back to the light, sat motionless, listening. Lady Cottesbrook took up a book, and ignored him. There was something unfathomable about her brother's bailiff to which she strongly objected.

An hour later, when he had gone, she spoke of it.

"That man has the eyes of a criminal, Jack. I am sure he isn't trustworthy. He is too brazen. Where in the world did you pick him up?"

To which Babbacombe made composed reply:

"I know all about him, and he is absolutely trustworthy. He was recommended to me by a friend. I am sorry you thought it necessary to be rude to him. There is nothing offensive about him that I can see."

"My dear boy, you see nothing offensive in a great many people whom I positively detest. However, he isn't worth an argument. Only, if you must ask the man to dine, for goodness' sake another time have some one else for me to talk to. I frankly admit that I have no talent for entertaining people of that class. Now tell me the latest about Cynthia Mortimer. Of course, she is one of the chosen guests?"

"She has promised to spend a week here," Babbacombe answered somewhat reluctantly. "I haven't seen her lately. She has been in Paris."

"What has she been doing there? Buying her trousseau?"

"I really don't know." There was a faint inflection of irritation in his voice.

"Doesn't her consenting to come here mean that she will accept you?" questioned Lady Cottesbrook. She never hesitated to ask in plainest terms for anything she wanted.

"No," Babbacombe said heavily. "It does not."

Lady Cottesbrook was silenced. After a little she turned her attention to other matters, to her brother's evident relief.

V

It was on a still, frosty evening of many stars that Cynthia came to Farringdean Castle. A young moon was low in the sky, and she paused to curtsy to it upon descending from the motor that had borne her thither.

She turned to find Babbacombe beside her.

"I hope it will bring you luck, Cynthia," he said.

She flashed a swift look at him, and gave him both her hands.

"Thank you, old friend," she said softly.

Her eyes were shining like the stars above them. She laughed a little tremulously.

"I couldn't get to the station to meet you," he said.

"I wanted to. Come inside. There is no one here whom you don't know."

"Thank you again," she said.

In another moment they were entering the great hall. Before an immense open fire-place a group of people were gathered at tea. There was a general buzz of greeting as Cynthia entered. She was always popular, wherever she went.

She scattered her own greetings broadcast, passing from one to another, greeting each in her high, sweet drawl—a gracious, impulsive woman whom to know was to love.

Babbacombe watched her with a dumb longing. How often he had pictured her as hostess where now she moved as guest! Well, that dream of his was shattered, but the glowing fragments yet burned in his secret heart. All his life long he would remember her as he saw her that night on his own hearth. Her loveliness was like a flower wide open to the sun. He thought her lovelier that night than she had ever been before. When she flitted away at length, he felt as if she took the warmth and brightness of the fireside with her.

There was no agreement between them, but he knew that she would be down early, and hastened his own

dressing in consequence. He found her waiting alone in the drawing-room before a regal fire. She wore a splendid star of diamonds in her dark hair. It sparkled in a thousand colours as she turned. Her dress was black, unrelieved by any ornament.

"Cynthia," he said, "you are exquisite!"

The words burst from him almost involuntarily. She put out her hand to him with a gesture half of acknowledgment, half of protest.

"I may be good to look at," she said, with a little whimsical smile. "But—I tell you, Jack—I feel a perfect reptile. It's heads I win, tails you lose; and—I just can't bear it."

There was a catch in the high voice that was almost a sob. Babbacombe took her hand and held it.

"My dear," she said, "it's nothing of the sort. You have done me the very great honour of giving me your full confidence, and I won't have you abusing yourself for it."

She shook her head. "I hate myself—there! And—and I'm frightened too. Jack, if you want me to marry you—you had better ask me now. I won't refuse you."

He looked her closely in the eyes. "No, Cynthia," he said very gravely.

"I am not laughing any," she protested.

He smiled a little. "It would be easier for me if you were," he said. "No, we will go through with this since we have begun. And you needn't be scared. He is hardly a ladies' man, according to my judgment, but he is not a bounder. I haven't asked him to meet you to-night. I thought it better not. In fact, I——"

He broke off at the sound of a step behind him. With a start Cynthia turned.

A short, thick-set man in riding-dress was walking up the room.

"I beg your pardon," he said formally, halting a few paces from Babbacombe. "I have been waiting for you in the library for the last hour. I sent you a message, but I conclude it was not delivered. Can I speak to you for a few seconds on a matter of business?"

He spoke with his eyes fixed steadily upon Babbacombe's face, ignoring the woman's presence as if he had not even seen her.

Babbacombe was momentarily disconcerted. He glanced at Cynthia before replying; and instantly, in her quick, gracious way, she came forward with extended hand.

"Why, Mr. West," she said, "don't you know me? I'm Cynthia Mortimer—a very old friend of yours. And I'm real glad to meet you again."

There was a quiver as of laughter in her words. The confidence of her action compelled some species of response. West took the outstretched hand for a single instant; but his eyes, meeting hers, held no recognition.

"I am afraid," he said sternly, "that your memory is better than mine."

It was a check that would have disheartened many women; not so Cynthia Mortimer.

She opened her eyes wide for a second, the next quite openly she laughed at him.

"You are not a bit cleverer than you used to be," she said. "But I kind of like you for it all the same. Come, Mr. West, I'm sure you will make an effort when I tell you that I want to be remembered. You once did a big thing for me which I have never forgotten—which I never shall forget."

West was frowning. "You have made a mistake," he said briefly.

She laughed again, softly, audaciously. There was a delicate flush on her face, and her eyes were very bright.

"No, Mr. Nat Verney West," she said, sinking her voice. "I'm a lot smarter than you think, and I don't make mistakes of that sort."

He shrugged his shoulders, and was silent. She was laughing still.

"Why can't we begin where we left off?" she asked ingenuously. "Back numbers are so dull, and we were long past this stage anyway. Lord Babbacombe," appealing suddenly to her host, "can't you persuade Mr. West to come to the third act? I always prefer to skip the second. And we finished the first long ago."

Babbacombe came to her assistance with his courteous smile. "Miss Mortimer considers herself in your debt, Mr. West," he said. "I think you will hurt her feelings if you try to repudiate her obligations."

"Yes, of course," laughed Cynthia. "It was a mighty big debt, and I have been wondering ever since how to get even with you. Oh, you needn't scowl. That doesn't hurt me any. Do you know you haven't altered a mite, you funny English bull-dog? Come, you know me now?"

"Yes, I know you," West said. "But I think it is a pity that you have renewed your acquaintance with me, and the sooner you drop me again the better." He spoke briefly and very decidedly, and having thus expressed himself he turned to Babbacombe. "I am going to the library. Perhaps you will join me there at your convenience."

With an abrupt bow to Cynthia, he turned to go. But instantly the high voice arrested him.

"Mr. West!"

He paused.

"Mr. West!" she said again, her voice half imperious, half pleading.

Reluctantly he faced round. She was waiting for him with a little smile quivering about her mouth. Her grey eyes met his with perfect composure.

"I want to know," she said, in her softest drawl, "if it is for my sake or your own that you regret this renewal of acquaintance."

"For yours, Miss Mortimer," he answered grimly.

"That's real kind of you," she rejoined. "And why?"

Again he gave that slight lift of the shoulders that she remembered so well.

"You know the proverb about touching pitch?"

"Some people like pitch," said Cynthia.

"Not clean people," threw back West.

"No?" she said. "Well, p'r'aps not. Anyway, it doesn't apply in this case. So I shan't drop you, Mr. West, thank you all the same! Good night!"

She offered him her hand with a gesture that was

nothing short of regal. And he—because he could do no less—took it, gripped it, and went his way.

"Ain't he rude?" murmured Cynthia; and she said it as if rudeness were the highest virtue a man could display.

VI

The early winter dusk was falling upon a world veiled in cold, drifting rain. Away in the distance, where the castle stood, many lights had begun to glimmer. It was the cosy hour when sportsmen collect about the fireside with noisy talk of the day's achievements.

The man who strode down the long, dark avenue towards the bailiff's house smiled bitterly to himself as he marked the growing illumination. It was four days since Cynthia Mortimer had extended to him the hand of friendship, and he had not seen her since. He was, in fact, studiously avoiding her, more studiously than he had ever avoided anyone in his life before. His daily visits to the castle he now paid early in the morning, before Babbacombe himself was dressed, long before any of the guests were stirring. And his refusal either to dine at the castle or to join the sportsmen during the day was so prompt and so emphatic that Babbacombe had refrained from pressing his invitation.

Not a word had passed between them upon the subject of Cynthia's recognition. West adhered strictly to business during his brief interviews with his chief. The smallest digression on Babbacombe's part he invariably ignored as unworthy of his attention, till even Babbacombe, with all his courtly consideration for others, began to regard him as a mere automaton, and almost to treat him as such.

Had he realised in the faintest degree what West was enduring at that time, his heart must have warmed to the man, despite his repellent exterior. But he had no means of realising.

The rust of twelve bitter years had corroded the

bolts of that closed door behind which the swindler hid his lonely soul, and it was not in the power of any man to move them.

So grimly he went his silent way, cynical, as only those can be to whom the best thing in life has been offered too late; proud also, after his curious, ironclad fashion, refusing sternly to bear a lance again in that field which had witnessed his dishonour.

He knew very well what those twinkling lights denoted. He could almost hear the clatter round the tea-table, the witless jests of the youngsters, the careless laughter of the women, the trivial, merry nonsense that was weaving another hour of happiness into the golden skein of happy hours. Contemptible, of course! Vanity of vanities! But how infinitely precious is even such vanity as this to those who stand outside!

The rain was beginning to patter through the trees. It would be a wet night. With his collar turned up to his ears, he trudged forward. He cared little for the rain. For twelve long years he had lived an outdoor life.

There were no lights visible in his own abode. The old woman who kept his house was doubtless gossiping with some crony up at the castle.

With his hand on the garden gate, he looked back at its distant, shining front. Then, with a shrug, as if impatient with himself for lingering, he turned to walk up the short, flagged pathway that led to his own door.

At the same instant a cry of pain—a woman's cry—came sharply through the dripping stillness of the trees. He turned back swiftly, banging the gate behind him.

A long slope rose, tree-covered, from the other side of the road. He judged the sound to have come from that direction, and he hurried towards it with swinging strides. Reaching the deep shadow, he paused, peering upwards.

At once a voice he knew called to him, but in such accents of agony that he hardly recognised it.

"Oh, come and help me! I'm here—caught in a trap! I can't move!"

In a moment he was crashing through the undergrowth with the furious recklessness of a wild animal.

"I am coming! Keep still!" he shouted as he went.

He found her crouched in a tiny hollow close to a narrow footpath that ran through the wood. She was on her knees, but she turned a deathly face up to him as he reached her. She was sobbing like a child.

"They are great iron teeth," she gasped, "fastened in my hand. Can you open them?"

"Don't move!" he ordered, as he dropped down beside her.

It was a poacher's trap, fortunately of a species with which he was acquainted. Her hand was fairly gripped between the iron jaws. He wondered with a set face if those cruel teeth had met in her delicate flesh.

She screamed as he forced it open, and fell back shuddering, half fainting, while he lifted her torn hand and examined it in the failing light.

It was bleeding freely, but not violently, and he saw with relief that the larger veins had escaped. He wrapped his handkerchief round it, and spoke.

"Come!" he said. "My house is close by. It had better be bathed at once."

"Yes," she assented shakily.

"Don't cry!" he said with blunt kindness.

"I can't help it," whispered Cynthia.

He helped her to her feet, but she trembled so much that he put his arm about her.

"It's only a stone's throw away," he said.

She went with him without question. She seemed dazed with pain.

Silently he led her down to his dark abode.

"I'm giving you a lot of trouble," she murmured, as they entered.

To which he made gruff reply:

"It's worse for you than for me!"

He put her into an easy chair, lighted a lamp, and departed for a basin of water.

When he returned, she had so far mastered herself as to be able to smile at him through her tears.

"I know I'm a drivelling idiot to cry!" she said, her

voice high and tremulous. "But I never felt so sick before!"

"Don't apologise," said West briefly. "I know."

He bathed the injury with the utmost tenderness, while she sat and watched his stern face.

"My!" she said suddenly, with a little, shaky laugh. "You are being real good to me, but why do you frown like that?"

He glanced at her with those piercing eyes of his.

"How did you do it?"

The colour came into her white face.

"I—was trying to spring the trap," she said, eyeing him doubtfully. "I didn't like to think of one of those cute little rabbits getting caught."

"Yes, but how did you manage to get your hand in the way?" said West.

She considered this problem for a little.

"I reckon I can't explain that mystery to you," she said, at length. "You see, I'm only a woman, and women often do things that are real foolish."

West's silence seemed to express tacit agreement with this assertion.

"Anyway," she resumed, making a wry face, "it's done. You are not vexed any because I made such a fuss?"

There was an odd wistfulness in her tone. West, busy bandaging, did not raise his eyes.

"I don't blame you for that," he said. "It must have hurt you infernally! If you take my advice, you will show it to a doctor."

She screwed up her face a second time.

"To please you, Mr. West?"

"No," he responded curtly. "As a sensible precaution."

"And if I don't happen to be remarkable for sense?" she suggested.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, I know," said Cynthia. "You say that to everything. It's getting rather monotonous. And I'm sure I'm very patient. You'll grant me that, at least?"

He turned his ice-blue eyes upon her.

"I am not good at paying compliments, Miss Mortimer," he said cynically. "Twelve years in prison have rusted all my little accomplishments."

She met his look with a smile, though her lips were quivering still.

"My! What a pity!" she said. "Has your heart got rusty, too?"

"Very," said West shortly.

"Can't you rub it off?" she questioned.

He uttered his ironic laugh.

"There wouldn't be anything left if I did."

"No?" she said whimsically. "Well, give it to me, and let me see what I can do!"

His eyes fell away from her, and the grim line of his jaw hardened perceptibly.

"That would be too hard a job even for you!" he said.

She rose and put out her free hand to him. Her eyes were very soft and womanly. A quaint little smile yet hovered about her lips.

"I reckon I'll have a try," she said gently.

He did not touch her hand, nor would he again meet her eyes.

"A hopeless task, I am afraid," he said. "And utterly unprofitable to all concerned. I am not a deserving object for your charity."

She laughed a trifle breathlessly.

"Say, Mr. West, couldn't you put that into words of one syllable? You try, and p'raps then I'll listen to you, and give you my views as well."

But West remained rigorously unresponsive. It was as if he were thinking of other things.

Cynthia uttered a little sigh and turned to go.

"So-long, Mr. West!" she said.

He went with her to the door.

"Shall I walk back with you?" he asked formally.

She shook her head.

"No. I'm better now, and it's quite light still beyond the trees. Good-bye, and—thank you!"

"Good-bye!" he said.

He followed her to the gate, opened it for her, and

stood there watching till he saw her emerge from the shadow cast by the overarching trees. Then—for he knew that the rest of the journey was no more than a few minutes' easy walk—he turned back into the house, and shut himself in.

Entering the room he had just quitted, he locked the door, and there he remained for a long, long time.

VII

It was not till she descended to dinner that Cynthia's injured hand was noticed.

She resolutely made light of it to all sympathisers, but it was plain to Babbacombe, at least, that it gave her considerable pain.

"Let me send for a doctor," he whispered, as she finally passed his chair.

But she shook her head with a smile.

"No, no. It will be all right in the morning."

But when he saw her in the morning, he knew at once that this prophecy had not been fulfilled. She met his anxious scrutiny with a smile indeed, but her heavy eyes belied it. He knew that she had spent a sleepless night.

"It wasn't my hand that kept me awake," she protested, when he charged her with this.

But Babbacombe was dissatisfied.

"Do see a doctor. I am sure it ought to be properly dressed," he urged. "I'll take you myself in the motor, if you will."

She yielded at length to his persuasion, though plainly against her will, and an hour later they drove off together, leaving the rest of the party to follow the hounds.

At the park gate they overtook West, walking swiftly. He raised his hat as they went by but did not so much as look at Cynthia.

A sudden silence fell upon her, and it was not till some minutes had passed that she broke it.

"Shall I tell you what kept me awake last night, Jack?" she said then. "I reckon you have a right to know."

He glanced at her, encountering one of those smiles, half sad, half humorous, that he knew so well. "You will do exactly as you please," he said.

"You're real generous," she responded. "Well, I'll tell you. I was busy burying my poor foolish little romance."

A deep glow showed suddenly upon Babbacombe's face. He was driving slowly, but he kept his eyes fixed steadily upon the stretch of muddy road ahead.

"Is it dead, then?" he asked, his voice very low.

She made a quaint gesture as of putting something from her.

"Yes, quite; and buried decently without any fuss. The blinds are up again, and I don't want any condolences. I'm going out into the sun, Jack. I'm going to live."

"And what about me?" said Babbacombe.

She turned in her quick way, and laid her hand upon his knee.

"Yes, I've been thinking about you. I am going back to London to-morrow, and the first thing I shall do will be to find you a real good wife."

"Thank you," he said, smiling a little. "But you needn't go to London for that."

"Oh, shucks!" said Cynthia, colouring deeply. "There's more than one woman in the world, Jack."

"Not for me," he said quietly.

She was silent for a space. Then:

"And if that one woman is such a sublime fool, such an ungrateful little beast, as not to be able to— to love you as you deserve to be loved?" she suggested, a slight break in her voice.

He turned his head at that, and looked for an instant straight into her eyes.

"She is still the one woman, dear," he said, very tenderly. "Always remember that."

She shook her head in protest. Her lips were quivering too much for speech.

Babbacombe drove slowly on in silence.

At last the hand upon his knee pressed slightly.

"You can have her if you like, Jack," Cynthia murmured. "She's going mighty cheap."

He freed his hand for a moment to grasp hers.

"I shall follow her to London," he said, "and woo her there."

She smiled at him gratefully and began to speak of other things.

The doctor was out, to her evident relief. Babbacombe wanted to go in search of another, but she would not be persuaded.

"I'm sure it will be all right to-morrow. If not, I shall be in town, and I can go to a doctor there. Please don't make a fuss about it. It's too absurd."

Reluctantly he abandoned the argument, and they followed the hounds in the motor instead.

VIII

Babbacombe's guests departed upon the following day. Cynthia was among the first to leave. With a flushed face and sparkling eyes she made her farewells, and even Babbacombe, closely as he observed her, detected no hint of strain in her demeanour.

Returning from the station in the afternoon after speeding some of his guests, he dropped into the local bank to change a cheque. The manager, with whom he was intimate, chanced to be present, and led him off to his own room.

"By the way," he said, "we were just going to send you notice of an overdraft. That last big cheque of yours has left you a deficit."

Babbacombe stared at him. He had barely a fortnight before deposited a large sum of money at the bank, and he had not written any large cheque since.

"I don't understand," he said. "What cheque?"

The manager looked at him sharply.

"Why, the cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds,

which your agent presented yesterday," he said. "It bore your signature and was dated the previous day. You wrote it, I suppose?"

Babbacombe was still staring blankly, but at the sudden question he pulled himself together.

"Oh, that! Yes, to be sure. Careless of me. I gave him a blank cheque for the Milland estate expenses some weeks ago. It must have been that."

But though he spoke with a smiling face, his heart had gone suddenly cold with doubt. He knew full well that the expenses of which he spoke had been paid by West long before.

He refused to linger, and went out again after a few commonplace, feeling as if he had been struck a stunning blow between the eyes.

Driving swiftly back through the park, he recovered somewhat from the shock. There must be—surely there would be!—some explanation.

Reaching West's abode, he stopped the motor and descended. West was not in and he decided to wait for him, chafing at the delay.

Standing at the window, he presently saw the man coming up the path. He moved slowly, with a certain heaviness, as though weary.

As he opened the outer door, Babbacombe opened the inner and met him in the hall.

"I dropped in to have a word with you," he said.

West paused momentarily before shutting the door. His face was in shadow.

"I thought so," he said. "I saw the motor."

Babbacombe turned back into the room. He was grappling with the hardest task he had ever had to tackle. West followed him in absolute silence.

With an immense effort, Babbacombe spoke.

"I was at the bank just now. I went to get some cash. I was told that my account was overdrawn. I can't understand it. There seems to have been some mistake."

He paused, but West said nothing whatever. The light was beginning to fail, but his expressionless face was clearly visible. It held neither curiosity nor dismay.

"I was told," Babbacombe said again, "that you cashed a cheque of mine yesterday for two hundred and fifty pounds. Is that so?"

"It is," said West curtly.

"And yet," Babbacombe proceeded, "I understood from you that the Millsand estate business was settled long ago."

"It was," said West.

"Then this cheque—this cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds—where did it come from, West?" There was a note of entreaty in Babbacombe's voice.

West jerked up his head at the sound. It was a gesture openly contemptuous. "Can't you guess?" he said.

Babbacombe stiffened at the callous question. "You refuse to answer me?" he asked.

"That is my answer," said West.

"I am to understand then that you have robbed me—that you have forged my signature to do so—that you—great heavens, man"—Babbacombe's amazement burst forth irresistibly—"it's incredible! Are you mad, I wonder? You can't have done it in your sober senses. You would never have been so outrageously clumsy."

West shrugged his shoulders.

"I am quite sane—only a little out of practice."

His words were like a shower of icy water. Babbacombe contracted instantly.

"You wish me to believe that you did this thing in cold blood—that you deliberately meant to do it?"

"Certainly I meant to do it," said West.

"Why?" said Babbacombe.

Again he gave the non-committal shrug, no more. There was almost a fiendish look in his eyes, as if somewhere in his soul a demon leaped and jeered.

"Tell me why," Babbacombe persisted.

"Why should I tell you?" said West.

Babbacombe hesitated for an instant; then gravely, kindly, he made reply:

"For the sake of the friendship that has been between us. I had not the faintest idea that you were in need of money. Why couldn't you tell me?"

West made a restless movement. For the first time his hard stare shifted from Babbacombe's face.

"Why go into these details?" he questioned harshly. "I warned you at the outset what to expect. I am a swindler to the backbone. The sooner you bundle me back to where I came from, the better. I shan't run away this time."

"I shall not prosecute," Babbacombe said.

"You will not!" West blazed into sudden ferocity. He had the look of a wild animal at bay. "You are to prosecute!" he exclaimed violently. "Do you hear? I won't have any more of your damned charity! I'll go down into my own limbo and stay there, without let or hindrance from you or any other man. If you are fool enough to offer me another chance, as you call it, I am not fool enough to take it. The only thing I'll take from you is justice. Understand?"

"You wish me to prosecute?" Babbacombe said.

"I do!"

The words came with passionate force. West stood in almost a threatening attitude. His eyes shone in the gathering dusk like the eyes of a crouching beast—a beast that has been sorely wounded, but that will fight to the last.

The man's whole demeanour puzzled Babbacombe—his total lack of shame or penitence, his savagery of resentment. There was something behind it all—something he could not fathom, that baffled him however he sought to approach it. In days gone by he had wondered if the fellow had a heart. That wonder was still in his mind. He himself had utterly failed to reach it if it existed. And Cynthia—even Cynthia—had failed. Yet, somehow, vaguely, he had a feeling that neither he nor Cynthia had understood.

"I don't know what to say to you, West," he said at length.

"Why say anything?" said West.

"Because," Babbacombe said slowly. "I don't believe—I can't believe—that simply for the sake of a paltry sum like that you would have risked so much. You could have swindled me in a thousand ways before

now, and done it easily, too, with small chance of being found out. But this—this was bound to be discovered sooner or later. You must have known that. Then why, why in heaven's name did you do it? Apart from every other consideration, it was so infernally foolish. It wasn't like you to do a thing like that." He paused, then suddenly clapped an urgent hand upon the swindler's shoulder. "West," he said, "I'll swear that you never played this game with me for your own advantage. Tell the truth, man! Be honest with me in heaven's name! Give me the chance of judging you fairly! It isn't much to ask."

West drew back sharply.

"Why should I be honest with you?" he demanded. "You have never been honest with me from the very outset. I owe you nothing in that line, at all events."

He spoke passionately still, yet not wholly without restraint. He was as a man fighting desperate odds, and guarding some precious possession while he fought. But these words of his were something of a revelation to Babbacombe. He changed his ground to pursue it.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know very well!" West flung the words from between set teeth, and with them he abruptly turned his back upon Babbacombe, lodging his arms upon the mantelpiece. "I am not going into details on that point or any other. But the fact is there, and you know it. You have never been absolutely straight in your dealings with me. I knew you weren't. I always knew it. But how crooked you were I did not know till lately. If you had been any other man, I believe I should have given you a broken head for your pains. But you are so damnable courteous, as well as such an unutterable fool!" He broke off with a hard laugh and a savage kick at the coals in front of him. "I couldn't see myself doing it," he said, "humbug as you are."

"And so you took this method of making me suffer?" Babbacombe suggested, his voice very quiet and even.

"You may say so if it satisfies you," said West without turning.

"It does not satisfy me!" There was a note of sternness in the steady rejoinder. "It satisfies me so little that I insist upon an explanation. Turn round and tell me what you mean."

But West stood motionless and silent, as though hewn in granite.

Babbacombe waited with that in his face which very few had ever seen there. At last, as West remained stubborn, he spoke again.

"I suppose you have found out my original reason for giving you a fresh start in life, and you resent my having kept it a secret."

"I resent the reason," West tossed the words over his shoulder as though he uttered them against his will.

"Are you sure even now that you know what that reason was?" Babbacombe asked.

"I am sure of one thing!" West spoke quickly, vehemently, as a man shaken by some inner storm. "Had I been in your place—had the woman I wanted to marry asked me to bring back into her life some worthless scamp to whom she had taken a sentimental fancy when she was scarcely out of the schoolroom, I'd have seen him damned first, and myself too—had I been in your place. I would have refused point blank, even if it had meant the end of everything."

"I believe you would," Babbacombe said. The sternness had gone out of his voice, and a certain weariness had taken its place. "But you haven't quite hit the truth of the matter. Since you have guessed so much you had better know the whole. I did not do this thing by request. I undertook it voluntarily. If I had not done so, some other means—possibly some less discreet means—would have been employed to gain the same end."

"I see!" West's head was bent. He seemed to be closely examining the marble on which his arms rested. "Well," he said abruptly, "you've told me the truth. I will do the same to you. This business has got to end. I have done my part towards bringing that about. And now you must do yours. You will have to prosecute, whether you like it or not. It is the only way."

"What?" Babbacombe said sharply.

West turned at last. The glare had gone out of his eyes—they were cold and still as an Arctic sky.

"I think we understand one another," he said. "I see you don't like your job. But you'll stick to it, for all that. There must be an end—a painless end if possible, without regrets. She has got to realise that I'm a swindler to the marrow of my bones, that I couldn't turn to and lead a decent, honourable life—even for love of her."

The words fell grimly, but there was no mockery in the steely eyes, no feeling of any sort. They looked full at Babbacombe with unflinching steadiness, that was all.

Babbacombe listened in the silence of a great amazement. Vaguely he had groped after the truth, but he had never even dimly imagined this. It struck him dumb—this sudden glimpse of a man's heart which till that moment had been so strenuously hidden from him.

"My dear fellow," he said at last; "but this is insanity!"

"Perhaps," West returned, unmoved. "They say every man has his mania. This is mine, and it is a very harmless one. It won't hurt you to humour it."

"But—good heavens!—have you thought of her?" Babbacombe exclaimed.

"I am thinking of her only," West answered quietly. "And I am asking you to do the same, both now and after you have married her."

"And send you to perdition to secure her peace of mind? A thousand times—no!" Babbacombe turned, and began to pace the room as though his feelings were too much for him. But very soon he stopped in front of West, and spoke with grave resolution. "Look here," he said, "I think you know that her happiness is more to me than anything else in the world, except my honour. To you it seems to be even more than that. And now listen, for as man to man I tell you the truth. You hold her happiness in the hollow of your hand!"

West's face remained as a mask; his eyes never varied.

"You can change all that," he said.

Babbacombe shook his head.

"I am not even sure that I shall try."

"What then?" said West. "Are you suggesting that the woman you love should marry an ex-convict—a notorious swindler, a blackguard?"

"I think," Babbacombe answered firmly, "that she ought to be allowed to decide that point."

"Allowed to ruin herself without interference," substituted West, sneering faintly. "Well, I don't agree with you, and I shall never give her the opportunity. You won't move me from that if you argue till Doomsday. So, in heaven's name, take what the gods offer, and leave me alone. Marry her. Give her all a good woman ever wants—a happy home, a husband who worships her, and children for her to worship, and you will soon find that I have dropped below the horizon."

He swung round again to the fire, and drove the poker hard into the coals.

"And find another agent as soon as possible," he said; "a respectable one this time, one who won't let you down when you are not looking, who won't call you a fool when you make mistakes—in short, a gentleman. There are plenty of them about. But they are not to be found in the world's rubbish heap. There's nothing but filth and broken crockery there."

He ended with his brief, cynical laugh, and Babbacombe knew that further discussion would be vain. For good or ill the swindler had made his decision, and he realised that no effort of his would alter it. To attempt to do so would be to beat against a stone wall—a struggle in which he might possibly hurt himself, but which would make no difference whatever to the wall.

Reluctantly he abandoned the argument, and prepared to take his departure.

But later, as he drove home, the man's words recurred to him and dwelt long in his memory. Their bitterness seemed to cloak something upon which no eye had ever looked—a regret unspeakable, a passionate repentance that found no place.

IX

"I have just discovered of whom it is that your very unpleasant agent reminds me," observed Lady Cottesbrook at the breakfast-table on the following morning. "It flashed upon me suddenly. He is the very image of that nasty person, Nat Verney, who swindled such a crowd of people a few years ago. I was present at part of his trial, and a more callous, thoroughly insolent creature I never saw. I suppose he is still in prison. I forget exactly what the sentence was, but I know it was a long one. I should think this man must be his twin-brother, Jack. I never saw a more remarkable likeness."

Babbacombe barely glanced up from his letter. "You are always finding that the people you don't like resemble criminals, Ursula," he said, with something less than his usual courtesy. "Did you say you were leaving by the eleven fifty? I think I shall come with you."

"My dear Jack, how you change! I thought you were going to stay down here for another week."

"I was," he answered. "But I have had a line from Cynthia to tell me that her hand is poisoned from that infernal trap. It may be very serious. It probably is, or she would not have written."

That note of Cynthia's had in fact roused his deepest anxiety. He had fancied all along that she had deliberately made light of the injury. Soon after three o'clock he was in town, and he hastened forthwith to Cynthia's flat in Mayfair.

He found her on a couch in her dainty boudoir, lying alone before the fire. Her eyes shone like stars in her white face as she greeted him.

"It was just dear of you to come so soon," she said. "I kind of thought you would. I'm having a real bad time for once, and I thought you'd like to know."

"Tell me about it," he said, sitting down beside her.

Her left hand lay in his for a few moments, but after

a little she softly drew it away. Her right was in a sling.

"There's hardly anything to tell," she said. "Only my arm is bad right up to the shoulder, and the doctor is putting things on the wound so that it shan't leave off hurting night or day. I dreamt I was Dante last night. But no, I won't tell you about that. It was too horrible. I've never been real sick before, Jack. It frightens me some. I went for you because I felt I wanted—a friend to talk to. It was outrageously selfish of me."

"It was the kindest thing you could do," Babbacombe said.

"Ah, but you mustn't misunderstand." A note of wistfulness sounded in the high voice. "You won't misunderstand, will you, Jack? I only want—a friend."

"You needn't be afraid, Cynthia," he said. "I shall never attempt to be anything else to you without your free consent."

"Thank you," she murmured. "I know I'm very mean. But I had such a bad night. I thought that all the devils in hell were peering at me because I had told you my romance was dead. Oh, Jack! it was a great big lie, and it's come home to roost. I can't get rid of it. It won't die."

He heard the quiver of tears in her confession, and set his teeth.

"My dear," he said, "don't fret about that. I knew it at the bottom of my heart."

She reached out her hand to him again. "I hate myself for treating you like this," she whispered. "But I—I'm lonely, and I can't help it. You—you shouldn't be so kind."

"Ah, child, don't grudge me your friendship," he said. "It is the dearest thing I have."

"It's so hard," wailed Cynthia, "that I can give you so little, when I would so gladly give all if I could."

"You are not to blame yourself for that," he answered steadily. "You loved each other before I ever met you."

"Loved each other!" she said. "Do you really mean that, Jack?"

He hesitated. He had not intended to say so much.

"Jack," she urged piteously, "then you think he really cares?"

"Don't you know it, Cynthia?" he asked, in a low voice.

"My heart knows it," she said brokenly. "But my mind isn't sure. Do you know, Jack, I almost proposed to him because I felt so sure he cared. And he—he just looked beyond me, as if—as if he didn't even hear."

"He thinks he isn't good enough for you," Babbacombe said, with an effort. "I don't think he will ever be persuaded to act otherwise. He seems to consider himself hopelessly handicapped."

"What makes you say that?" whispered Cynthia.

He had not meant to tell her. It was against his will that he did so; but he felt impelled to do it. For her peace of mind it seemed imperative that she should understand.

And so, in a few words, he told her of West's abortive attempt to plunge a second time into the black depths from which he had so recently escaped, of the man's absolutely selfless devotion, of his rigid refusal to suffer even her love for him to move him from this attitude.

Cynthia listened with her bright eyes fixed unswervingly upon Babbacombe's face. She made no comment of any sort when he ended. She only pressed his hand.

He remained with her for some time, and when he got up to go at length, it was with manifest reluctance. He lingered beside her after he had spoken his farewell, as though he still had something to say.

"You will come again soon," said Cynthia.

"To-morrow," he answered. "And—Cynthia, there is just one thing I want to say."

She looked up at him questioningly.

"Only this," he said. "You sent for me because you wanted a friend. I want you from now onward to treat me and to think of me in that light only. As I now se

things, I do not think I shall ever be anything more to you than just that. Remember it, won't you, and make use of me in any way that you wish. I will gladly do anything."

The words went straight from his heart to hers. Cynthia's eyes filled with sudden tears. She reached out and clasped his hand very closely.

"Dear Jack," she said softly: "you're just the best friend I have in the world, and I shan't forget it—ever."

He called early on the following day, and received the information that she was keeping her bed by the doctor's orders. Later in the day he went again, and found that the doctor was with her. He decided to wait, and paced up and down the drawing-room for nearly an hour. Eventually the doctor came.

Babbacombe knew him slightly, and was not surprised when, at sight of him in the doorway, the doctor turned aside at once, and entered the room.

"Miss Mortimer told me I should probably see you," he said, "and if I did see, she desired me to tell you everything. I am sorry to say that I think very seriously of the injury. I have just been persuading her to go into a private nursing home. This is no place to be ill in, and I shall have to perform a slight operation to-morrow which will necessitate the use of an anæsthetic."

"An operation!" Babbacombe exclaimed, agast.

"It is absolutely imperative," the doctor said, "to get at the seat of the poison. I am making every effort to prevent the mischief spreading any further. Should the operation fail, no power on earth will save her hand. It may mean the arm as well."

Babbacombe listened to further explanations, sick at heart.

"When do you propose to move her?" he asked presently.

"At once. I am going now to make arrangements."

"May I go in and see her if she will admit me?"

"I don't advise it to-night. She is excited and overstrung. To-morrow, perhaps, if all goes well.

Come round to my house at two o'clock, and I will let you know."

But Babbacombe did not see her the next day, for it was found advisable to keep her absolutely quiet. The doctor was very reticent, but he gathered from his manner that he entertained very grave doubts as to the success of his treatment.

On the day following he telephoned to Babbacombe to meet him at the home in the afternoon.

Babbacombe arrived before the time appointed, and spent half an hour in sick suspense, awaiting the doctor's coming.

The latter entered at last, and greeted him with a serious face.

"I am going to let you see Miss Mortimer," he said. "What I feared from the outset has taken place. The mischief was neglected too long at the beginning. There is nothing for it but amputation of the hand. And it must be performed without delay."

Babbacombe said something inarticulate that resolved itself with an effort into:

"Have you told her?"

"Yes, I have." The doctor's voice was stern. "And she absolutely refuses to consent to it. I have given her till to-morrow morning to make up her mind. After that——" He paused a moment, and looked Babbacombe straight in the face. "After that," he said, with emphasis, "it will be too late."

When Babbacombe entered Cynthia's presence a few minutes later, he walked as a man dazed. He found her lying among pillows, with the sunlight streaming over her, transforming her brown hair into a mass of sparkling gold. The old quick, gracious smile welcomed him as he bent over her. There were deep shadows about her eyes, but they were wonderfully bright. The hand she gave him was as cold as ice, despite the flush upon her cheeks.

"You have been told?" she questioned. "Yes, I see you have. Now, don't preach to me, Jack—dear Jack. It's too shocking to talk about. Can you believe it? I can't. I've always been so clever with

my hands. Have you a pencil? I want you to down a wire for me."

In her bright, imperious way, she dominated him. It was well nigh impossible to realise that she was dangerously ill.

He sat down beside her with pencil and paper.

"Address it to Mr. West," said Cynthia, her eyes following his fingers. "Yes. And now put just this: 'I am sick, and wanting you. Will you come?—Cynthia.' And write the address. Do you reckon he'll come, Jack?"

"Let me add 'Urgent,'" he said.

"No, Jack. You are not to. Add nothing. If he doesn't come for that, he will never come at all. And I shan't wait for him," she added under her breath.

She seemed impatient for him to depart and dispatch the message, but when he took his leave her eyes followed him with a wistful gratitude that sent a thrill to his heart. She had taken him at his word, and had made him her friend in need.

X

"If he doesn't come for that, he will never come at all."

Over and over Cynthia whispered the words to herself as she lay, with her wide, shining eyes upon the door, waiting. She was a gambler who had staked all on the final throw, and she was watching, weak and ill as she was after long suffering, watching restlessly, persistently, for the result of that last great venture. Surely he would come—surely—surely!

Once she spoke imperiously to the nurse.

"If a gentleman named West calls, I must see him at once, whatever the hour."

The nurse raised no obstacle. Perhaps she realised that it would do more harm than good to thwart her patient's caprice.

And so hour after hour Cynthia lay waiting for the

answer to her message, and hour followed hour in slow, uneventful procession, bringing her neither comfort nor repose.

At length the doctor came and offered her morphia, but she refused it, with feverish emphasis.

"No, no, no! I don't want to sleep. I am expecting a friend."

"Won't it do in the morning?" he said persuasively.

Her grey eyes flashed eager inquiry up at him.

"He is here?"

The doctor nodded.

"He has been here some time, but I hoped you would settle down. I want you to sleep."

Sleep! Cynthia almost laughed. How inexplicably foolish were even the cleverest of men!

"I will see him now," she said. "And, please, alone," as the doctor made a sign to the nurse.

He moved away reluctantly, and again she almost laughed at his imbecility.

But a minute later she had forgotten everything in the world save that upon which her eyes rested—a short, broad-shouldered man, clean-shaven, with piercing blue eyes that looked straight at her with something—something in their expression that made the heart within her leap and quiver like the strings of an instrument under a master hand.

He came quietly to the bedside, and stood looking down upon her, not uttering a word.

She stretched up her trembling hand.

"I'm real glad to see you," she said weakly. "You got my message? It—it—I hope it didn't annoy you any."

"It di hn't," said West.

His voice was curt and strained. His fingers had closed very tightly upon her hand.

"Sit down," murmured Cynthia. "No, don't let go. It helps me some to have you hold my hand. Mr West, I've got to tell you something—something that will make you read mad. I'm rather frightened, too. It's because I'm sick. You—you must just make allowances."

A light kindled in West's eyes that shone like a ^{one} flame, but still he held himself rigid, inflexible as a figure hewn in granite.

"Pray don't distress yourself, Miss Mortimer," he said stiffly. "Wouldn't it be wiser to wait till you are better before you go any further?"

"I never shall be better," Cynthia rejoined, a tremor of passion in her voice. "I never shall go any further, unless you hear me out to-night."

West frowned a little, but still that strange light shone in his steady eyes.

"I am quite at your service," he said, "either now or at any future time. But if this interview should make you worse—"

"Oh, shucks!" said Cynthia, with a ghostly little smile. "Don't talk through your hat, Mr. West!"

West became silent. He was still holding her hand in a warm, close grasp that never varied.

"Let's get to business," said Cynthia, with an effort to be brisk. "It begins with a confession. You know better than anyone how I managed to hurt my hand so badly. But even you don't know everything. Even you never suspected that—that it wasn't an accident at all; that, in fact, I did it on purpose."

She broke off for a moment, avoiding his eyes, but clinging tightly to his hand.

"I did it," she went on breathlessly—"I did it because I heard you in the drive below, and I wanted to attract your attention. I couldn't see you, but I knew it was you. I was just going to spring the trap with my foot, and then—and then I heard you, and I stooped down—it came to me to do it, and I never stopped to think—I stooped down and put my hand in the way. I never thought—I never thought it would hurt so frightfully, or that it could come to this."

She was crying as she ended, crying piteously; while West sat like a stone image, gazing at her.

"Oh, do speak to me!" she sobbed. "Do say something! Do you know what they want to do? But I won't let them—I won't let them! It—it's too dreadful a thing to happen to a woman. I can't bear

it. I won't bear it. It will be much easier to die. But you shall know the truth first."

"Cynthia, stop!" It was West's voice at last, but not as she had ever heard it. It came from him hoarse and desperate, as though wrung by the extreme of torture. He had sunk to his knees by the bed. His face was nearer to hers than it had ever been before. "Don't cry!" he begged her huskily. "Don't cry! Why do you tell me this if it hurts you to tell me?"

"Because I want you to know!" gasped Cynthia. "Wait! Let me finish! I wanted—to see—if if you really cared for me. I thought—if you did—you wouldn't be able to go on pretending. But—but—you managed to—somehow—after all."

She ended, battling with her tears; and West, the strong, the cold, the cynical, bowed his head upon her hand and groaned.

"It was for your own sake," he muttered brokenly, without looking up.

"I know," whispered back Cynthia. "That was just what made it so impossible to bear. Because, you see, I cared, too."

He was silent, breathing heavily.

Cynthia watched his bent head wistfully, but she did not speak again till she had mastered her own weakness.

"Mr. West," she said softly at length.

He stirred, pressing her hand more tightly to his eyes.

"I am going to tell you now," proceeded Cynthia, "just why I asked you to come to me. I reckon you know all about this trouble of mine—that I shall either die very soon, or else have to carry my arm in a sling for the rest of my life. Now that's where you come in. Would you—would you feel very badly if I died, I wonder?"

He raised his head at that, and she saw his face as she had seen it once long ago—alert, vital, full of the passionate intensity of his love for her.

"You can't die!" he declared fiercely. "Who says you are going to die?"

Cynthia's eyes fell before the sudden fire that blazed at her from his. "Unless I consent to be a cripple all

my days," she said, with a curious timidity wholly unlike her usual dainty confidence.

"Of course you will consent," West said, sweeping down her half-offered resistance with sheer, overmastering strength. "You'll face this thing like the brave woman you are. Good heavens! As if there were any choice!"

"There is," Cynthia whispered, looking at him shyly, through lowered lids. "There is a choice. But it rests with you. Mr. West, if you want me to do this thing—if you really want me to, and it's a big thing to do, even for you—I'll do it. There! I'll do it! I'll go on living like a chopped worm for your sake. But—but—I reckon you'll have to do something for me in return. Now I wonder if you can guess what I'm hinting at?"

West's face changed. The eagerness went out of it. Something of his habitual griminess of expression returned.

Yet his voice was full of tenderness when he spoke.

"Cynthia," he said very earnestly, "there is nothing on this earth that I will not do for you. But don't ask me to be the means of ruining you socially, of depriving you of all your friends, of degrading you to a position that would break your heart."

A glimmer of amusement flashed across Cynthia's drawn face.

"My!" she said, a little quiver in her voice. "You are funny, you men, dull as mules and blind as bats. My dear, there's only one person in this little universe who has the power to break my heart, and it ain't any fault of his that he didn't do it long ago. No, don't speak. There's nothing left for you to say. The petition is dismissed, but not the petitioner; so listen to me instead. I've a sentimental fancy to be able to have 'Mrs. Nat V. West' written on my tombstone in the event of my demise to-morrow. I want you to make arrangements for the same."

"Cynthia!"

The word was almost a cry, but she checked it, her fingers on his lips.

"You great big silly!" she murmured, laughing weakly. "Where's your sense of humour? Can't you see I'm not going to die? But I'm going to be Mrs. Nat V. West all the same. Now, is that quite understood, I wonder? Because I don't want to cry any more—I'm tired."

"You wish to marry me in the morning—before the operation?" West said, speaking almost under his breath.

His face was close to hers. She looked him suddenly straight in the eyes.

"Yes, just that," she told him softly. "I want—dear—I want to go to sleep holding my husband's hand."

XI

"It's a clear case of desertion," declared Cynthia imperturbably, two months later. "But never mind that now, Jack. How do you like my sling? Isn't it just the cutest thing in creation?"

"You look splendid," Babbacombe said with warmth, but he surveyed her with slightly raised brows notwithstanding.

She nodded brightly in response.

"No, I'm not worrying any, I assure you. You don't believe me, I see. So here's something for you to read that will set your mind at rest."

Babbacombe read, with a slowly clearing face. The note he held was in his agent's handwriting.

"I am leaving you to-day, for I feel, now you are well again, that you will find it easier in my absence to consider very carefully your position. Your marriage to me was simply an act of impulse. I gave way in the matter because you were in no state to be thwarted. But if, after consideration, you find that that act was a mistake, dictated by weakness, and heaven knows what besides of generosity and pity, something may yet

be done to remedy it. It has never been published, and, if you are content to lead a single life, no one who matters need ever know that it took place. I am returning to my work at Farringham for the present. I am aware that you may find some difficulty in putting your feelings in this matter into words. If so, I shall understand your silence. Yours,

"N. V. WEST."

"Ain't he quaint?" said Cynthia, with a little gay grimace. "Now do you know what I'm going to do, Jack? I'm going to get a certain good friend of mine to drive me all the way to Farringham in his motor. It's Sunday, you know, and all that, but we'll conspire to make the train impossible."

"How soon do you wish to start?" asked Babbacombe.

"Right away!" laughed Cynthia. "And if we don't get run in for exceeding the speed limit, we ought to be there by seven."

It was as a matter of fact barely half past six when Babbacombe turned the motor in at the great gates of Farringham Park. A sound of church bells came through the evening twilight. The trees of the avenue were still bare, but there was a misty suggestion of swelling buds in the saplings. The wind that softly rustled through them seemed to whisper a special secret to each.

"I like those bells," murmured Cynthia. "They make you feel sort of holy. Say, Jack, you're not fretting any?"

"No, dear," said Babbacombe steadily.

She squeezed his arm.

"I'm real glad, for—honest, I guess I'm not worth it. Good-bye, then, dear Jack. Just drive straight away directly you've put me down. I shall find my own way in."

He took her at her word as he always did, and, having deposited her at the gate under the trees that led to his bailiff's abode, he shot swiftly away into the gathering dusk without a single glance behind.

West, entering his home a full hour later, heavy-footed, the inevitable cigarette between his lips, was surprised to discover on hanging up his cap a morsel of white pasteboard stuck jauntily into the glass of the hatstand. It seemed to fling him an airy challenge. He stooped to look. A lady's visiting-card! Mrs. Nat V. West!

A deep flush rose suddenly in his weather-beaten face. He seized the card, and crushed it against his lips.

But a few moments later, when he opened his dining-room door, there was no hint of emotion in his bearing. He bore himself with the rigidity of a man who knows he has a battle before him.

The room was aglow with flickering firelight, and out of the glow a high voice came—a cheery, inconsequent voice.

"Oh, here you are at last! Come right in and light the lamp. Did you see my card? Ah, I knew you would be sure to look at yourself directly you came in. There's nobody at home but me. I suppose your old woman's gone to church. I've been waiting for you such a while—twelve years and a bit. Just think of it."

She was standing on the hearth waiting for him, but since he moved but slowly she stepped forward to meet him, her hand impetuously outstretched.

He took it, held it closely, let it go.

"We must talk things over," he said.

"Splendid!" said Cynthia. "Where shall we begin? Never mind the lamp. Let's sit by the fire and be cosy."

He moved forward with her—it was impossible to do otherwise—but there was no yielding in his action. He held himself as straight and stiff as a soldier on parade. He had bitten through his cigarette, and he tossed it into the fire.

"Now sit down!" said Cynthia hospitably. "That chair is for you, and I am going to curl up on the floor at your feet as becomes a dutiful wife."

"Don't, Cynthia!" he said under his breath. But she had her way, nevertheless. There were times when she seemed able to attain this with scarcely an effort.

She seated herself on the hearthrug with her face to the fire.

"Go on," she said, in a tone of gentle encouragement; "I'm listening."

West's eyes stared beyond her into the flames.

"I haven't much to say," he said quietly at length.

"Only this. You are acting without counting the cost. There is a price to pay for everything, but the price you will have to pay for this is heavier than you realise. There should be—there can be—no such thing as equality between a woman in your position—a good woman—and a blackguard in mine."

Cynthia made a little gesture of impatience without turning her head.

"Oh, you needn't treat me as if I were on a different plane," she said. "I'm a sinner, too, in my own humble way. It's unreasonable of you to go on like that, unkind as well. I may be only a sprat in your estimation, but even a sprat has its little feelings, its little heartaches, too, I dare say." She broke off with a sigh and a laugh; then, drawing impulsively nearer to him, but still without turning: "Do you remember once, ages and ages ago, you were on the verge of saying something to me, of—telling me something? And we were interrupted. Mr. West, I've been waiting all these years to hear what that something was."

West did not stir an eyelid. His face was stern and hard.

"I forget," he said.

She turned upon him then, raising a finger and pointing straight at him.

"That," she said, with conviction, "is just one of your lies!"

West became silent, still staring fixedly into the fire.

Cynthia drew nearer still. She touched his breast with her outstretched finger.

"Mr. West," she said gravely, "I reckon you'll have to leave off being a blackguard, and take to being an honest man. That's the only solution of the difficulty that I can think of now that you have got a crippled wife to look after."

He gripped her wrist, but still he would not look at her.

"This is madness," he said, grinding out the words through clenched teeth. "You are making a fatal mistake. I am not fit to be your husband. It is not in my power to give you happiness."

She did not shrink from his hold, though it was almost violent. Her eyes were shining like stars.

"That," she said, with quaint assurance, "is just another of your lies."

His hand relaxed slowly till her wrist was free.

"Do you know," he said, still with that iron self-suppression, "that only a few weeks ago I committed forgery?"

"Yes," said Cynthia. "And I know why you did it, too. It wasn't exactly smart, but it was just dear of you all the same."

The swindler's face quivered suddenly, uncontrollably. He tried to laugh—the old harsh laugh, but the sound he uttered was akin to something very different. He leaned forward sharply, and covered his face with his hands.

And in that moment Cynthia knew that the walls of the citadel had fallen at last, so that it lay open for her to enter in.

She knelt up quickly. Her arm slipped round his neck. She drew his head with soft insistence to her breast.

"My own boy, it's over; forget it all. It wasn't meant to handicap you always. We'll have another deal now, please God, and start afresh as partners."

There followed a pause—a silence that had in it something sacred. Then West raised himself, and took her face between his hands. For a moment he looked deep into her eyes, his own alight with a vital fire.

Then, "As lovers, Cynthia," he said, and kissed her on the lips.

THE NONENTITY

"It is well known that those fight hardest who fight in vain," remarked Lord Ronald Prior complacently. "But I should have thought a woman of your intellect would have known better. It's such a rank waste of energy to struggle against Fate."

He spoke in the easy drawl habitual to him. His grey eyes held the pleasant smile that was seldom absent from them. Not in any fashion a striking personality, this; his kindest friend could not have called him imposing, nor could the most uncharitable have described him as anything worse than dull. Enemies he had none. His invariable good temper was his safeguard in this particular. The most offensive remark would not have provoked more than momentarily raised eyebrows.

He was positively characterless, so Beryl Denvers told herself a dozen times a day. How could she possibly marry anyone so neutral? And yet in his amiable, exasperatingly placid fashion he had for some time been laying siege to her affections. He had shaved off his beard because he had heard her say that she objected to hairy men, and he seemed to think that this sacrifice on his part entitled him to a larger share of her favour than the rest of the world, certainly much more than she was disposed to bestow.

He had, in fact, assumed almost an air of proprietorship over her of late—a state of affairs which she strongly resented, but was powerless to alter. He had a little money, but no prospects to mention, and had never

done anything worth doing in all his five-and-thirty years. And yet he seemed to think himself an eligible *parti* for one of the most popular women in the district. His social position gave him a certain precedence among her other admirers, but Beryl herself refused to recognise this. She thought him presumptuous, and snubbed him accordingly.

But Lord Ronald's courtship seemed to thrive upon snubs. He was never in the least disconcerted thereby. He hadn't the brains to take offence, she told herself impatiently, and yet somewhere at the back of her mind there lurked a vagrant suspicion that he was not always as obtuse as he seemed.

She had been rude to him on the present occasion, and he had retaliated with his smiling speech regarding her intellect which had made her feel vaguely uncomfortable. It might have been—it probably was—an effort at bluff on his part, but, uttered by any other man, it would have had almost a hectoring sound.

"I haven't the smallest notion what you mean," she said, after a decided pause.

"Charmed to explain," he murmured.

"Pray don't trouble!" she rejoined severely. "It doesn't signify in the least. Explanations always bore me."

Lord Ronald smiled his imperturbable smile and flicked a quail from his sleeve.

"Especially when they are futile, eh, Mrs. Denvers? I'm not fond of 'em myself. Haven't much ability for that sort of thing."

"Have you any ability for anything, I wonder?" she said.

He turned his smooth, good-humoured countenance towards her. It wore a speculative look, as though he were wondering if by any chance she could have meant to be nasty.

"Oh, rather!" he said. "I can do quite a lot of things—and decently, too—from boiling potatoes to taming snakes. Never heard me play the cornet, have you?"

Beryl remarked somewhat unnecessarily that she

detested the cornet. She seemed to be thoroughly exasperated with him for some reason, and evidently wished that he would take his leave. But this fact had not apparently yet penetrated to Lord Ronald's understanding, for he was the most obliging of men at all times, and surely would never have dreamed of intruding his presence where it was unwelcome.

He sat on his favourite perch, the music-stool, and swung himself gently to and fro while he mildly upheld the virtues of the instrument she had slighted.

"I was asked to perform at a smoker the other night at the barracks," he said. "The men seemed to enjoy it immensely."

"Soldiers like anything noisy," said Beryl Denvers scathingly.

And then—because he had no retort ready—her heart smote her.

"But it was kind of you to go," she said. "I am sure you wouldn't enjoy it."

"Oh, but I did," he said, "on the whole. I should have liked it better if Fletcher hadn't been in the chair, and so, I think, would they. But it passed off very fairly well."

"Why do you object to Major Fletcher?" Beryl's tone was slightly aggressive.

Lord Ronald hesitated a little.

"He isn't much liked," he told her vaguely.

She frowned.

"But that is no answer. Are you afraid to answer me?"

He laughed at that, laughed easily and naturally, in the tolerant fashion that most exasperated her.

"Oh, no; I'm not afraid. But I don't like hurting people's feelings—especially yours."

"I do not see how that is possible," she rejoined, with dignity, "where my feelings are not concerned."

"Ah, but that's where it is," he responded. "You like Fletcher well enough to be extremely indignant if anyone were to tell you that he is not a nice person for you to know."

"I object to unpleasant insinuations regarding

anyone," she said, with slightly heightened colour. "They always appear to me cowardly."

"Yes; but you asked, you know," Lord Ronald reminded her gently.

Her colour deepened. It was not often that he got the better of her; not often, indeed, that he exerted himself to do so. She began to wish ardently that he would go. Really, he was quite insufferable to-day.

Had he been a man of any perception whatever, she would almost have thought that he fathomed her desire, for at this point he rose in a leisurely fashion as though upon the point of departure.

She rose also from behind the tea-table with a little inward pricking of conscience for wishing him gone. She wondered if he deemed her inhospitable, but if he did he disguised it very carefully, for his eyes held nothing but friendliness as they met her own.

"Has it never occurred to you," he said, "that you lead a very unprotected existence here?"

Something in his expression checked her first impulse to resent the question. Her lip quivered unexpectedly.

"Now and then," she said.

"Are you a man hater?" he asked deliberately.

She laughed a little.

"Why do you ask such an absurd question?"

He seemed to hesitate momentarily.

"Because—forgive me—wouldn't you be a good deal happier if you were to marry again?"

Again her colour rose hotly. What did the man mean by assuming this attitude? Was he about to plead his own cause, or that of another?

"I think it extremely doubtful," she replied stiffly, meeting his steady eyes with a hint of defiance.

"You have never thought of such a thing perhaps?" he suggested.

She smiled a woman's pitying smile.

"Of course I have thought of it."

"Then you have not yet met the man to whom you would care to entrust yourself?" he asked.

She took fire at this. It was an act of presumption not to be borne.

"Even if I had," she said, with burning cheeks, "I do not think I should make Lord Ronald Prior my confidant."

"No?" he said. "Yet you might do worse."

Her eyes shot scorn.

"Can a man be worse than inept?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "Since you ask me, I think he can—a good deal worse."

"I detest colourless people!" she broke in vehemently.

He smiled.

"In fact, you prefer black sheep to grey sheep. A good many women do. But it doesn't follow that the preference is a wise one."

The colour faded suddenly from her face. Did he know how ghastly a failure her first marriage had been? Most people knew. Could it be to this that he was referring? The bare suspicion made her wince.

"That," she said icily, "is no one's affair but my own. I am not wholly ignorant of the ways of the world. And I know whom I can trust."

"You trust me, for instance?" said Lord Ronald.

She looked him up and down witheringly.

"I should say you are quite the most harmless man I know."

"And you don't like me in consequence," he drawled, meeting the look with eyes so intent that, half startled, she lowered her own.

She turned away from him with an impatient gesture. He had never managed to embarrass her before.

"I should like you better if you weren't so officious," she said.

"But you have no one else to look after you," objected Lord Ronald.

"Well, in any case, it isn't your business," she threw back, almost inclined to laugh at his audacity.

"It would be if you married me," he pointed out, as patiently as if he were dealing with a fractious child.

"If I——"

She wheeled abruptly, amazed out of her disclaim. It was the most prosaic proposal she had ever had.

"If you married me," he repeated, keeping his eyes upon her. "You admit that I am harmless, so you would have nothing to fear from me. And as a watchdog, I think you would find me useful—and quite easy to manage," he added, with his serene smile.

Beryl was staring at him in wide astonishment. Was the man mad to approach her thus?

"No," he said. "I am quite sane; eccentric perhaps, but—as you are kind enough to observe—quite harmless. I never proposed to any woman before in my life, or so much as wanted to, so that must be my excuse for doing it badly. Really, you know, Mrs. Denvers, you might do worse than marry me. You might indeed."

But at that her indignation broke bounds. If he were not mad, it made him the more intolerable. Did he fancy himself so desirable, then, that he had merely to fling her the handkerchief—to find her at his feet? His impertinence transcended belief. But she would pay him back in his own coin. He should never again imagine himself irresistible.

"Really, Lord Ronald," she said, "if I actually needed a protector—which I do not—you are the very last person to whom I should turn. And as to a husband——"

She paused a moment, searching for words sufficiently barbed to penetrate even his complacency.

"Yes," he said gently, as if desirous to help her out.

"As to a husband," she said, "if I ever marry again, it will be a man I can respect—a man who can hold his own in the world; a man who is really a man, and not—not a nonentity!"

Impetuously she flung the words. For all his placidity, he seemed to possess the power to infuriate her. She longed intensely to move him to anger. She felt insulted by his composure, hating him because he remained so courteously attentive.

He made no attempt to parry her thrust, nor did he seem to be disconcerted thereby. He merely listened imperturbably till she ceased to speak. Then:

"Ah, well," he said good-humouredly, "you mustn't

take me too seriously. It was only a suggestion, you know." He picked up his hat with the words. "A pity you can't see your way to fall in with it, but you know best. Good-bye for the present."

Reluctantly, in response to his evident expectation, she gave him her hand.

"I wish you to understand, Lord Ronald," she said stiffly as she did so, "that my reply is final."

He lifted his eyebrows for a second, and she fancied—could it have been mere fancy?—that the grey eyes shone with a certain stony determination that was assuredly foreign to his whole nature as he made deliberate reply:

"That is quite understood, Mrs. Denvers. It was awfully kind of you to be so explicit. As you know, I am not good at taking hints."

And with that he was gone, untroubled to the last, perfectly courteous, almost dignified, while she stood and watched his exit with a vague and disquieting suspicion that he had somehow managed to get the best of it after all.

II

When Beryl Denvers first came to Kundaghat to be near her friend Mrs. Ellis, the Commissioner's wife, society in general openly opined that she had come to the populous hill station to seek a husband. She was young, she was handsome, and she was free. It seemed the only reasonable conclusion to draw. But since that date society had had ample occasion to change its mind. Beryl Denvers plainly valued her freedom above every other consideration, and those who wooed her wooed in vain. She discouraged the attentions of all mankind with a rigour that never varied, till society began to think that her brief matrimonial experience had turned her into a man-hater. And yet this was hard to believe, for, though quick-tempered, she was not bitter. She was quite willing to be friendly with all men, up to a

certain point. But beyond this subtle boundary few dared to venture and none remained. There was a wonderful fascination about her, a magnetism that few could resist ; but notwithstanding this she held herself aloof, never wholly forgetting her caution even with those who considered themselves her intimates.

Having dismissed Lord Ronald Prior, with whom she was almost unreasonably angry, she ordered her rickshaw and went out to cool her hot cheeks. The recent interview had disquieted her to the depths. She tried to regard his presumption as ludicrous, yet failed to do so. For what he had said was to a large extent true. She was unprotected, and she was also lonely, though this she never owned. She stifled a sigh as she set forth. Hitherto she had always liked Lord Ronald. Why had he couched his proposal in such impossible terms ?

She went to the polo-ground to watch the practice, and here found several friends in whose society she tried to forget her discomfiture. But it remained with her notwithstanding, and was still present when she returned to prepare for dinner. She was dining with the Ellises that night, and she hoped ardently that Lord Ronald would not make one of the party.

But she was evidently destined for mortification that day, for the first thing she saw upon entering the drawing-room was his trim figure standing by her hostess. And, " Lord Ronald will take you in, dear," said Nina Ellis, as she greeted her.

Beryl glanced at him, and he bowed in his courtly way. " I hope you don't mind," he murmured.

She did mind exceedingly, but it was impossible to say so. She could only yield to the inevitable and rest the tips of her fingers upon his sleeve.

It was with a decided sense of relief that she found Major Fletcher seated on her other side. A handsome, well-mannered cavalier was Major Fletcher, by every line of his figure a soldier, by every word of his conversation a gentleman. Exceedingly self-possessed at all times, it was seldom, if ever, that he laid himself open to a snub. It was probably for this very reason

that Beryl liked him better than most of the men in Kundaghat, was less distant with him, and usually granted the very little that he asked of her.

She turned to him at once with a random remark about the polo players, wondering if they would be able to hold their own against a native team with whom a match had been arranged for the following week.

"Oh, I think so," he said. "The Farabad men are strong, but our fellows are hard to beat. It won't be a walk-over for either side."

"Where will the match be played?" she asked, nervously afraid of letting the subject drop lest Lord Ronald should claim her attention.

"Here," said Major Fletcher. "It was originally to have been at Farabad, but there was some difficulty about the ground. I was over there arranging matters only this evening. The whole place is being turned upside down for a native fair which is to be held in a few days, when the moon is full. You ought to see it. It is an interesting sight—one which I believe you would enjoy."

"No doubt I should," she agreed. "But it is rather a long way, isn't it?"

"Not more than twelve miles," Fletcher's dark face kindled with a sudden idea. "I could drive you down some morning early if you cared for it."

Beryl hesitated. It was not her custom to accept invitations of this sort, but for once she felt tempted. She longed to demonstrate her independence to Lord Ronald, whose suggestions regarding her inability to take care of herself had so sorely hurt her pride. Might she not permit herself this one small thing for his benefit? It would be so good for him to realise that she was no incompetent girl, but a woman of the world and thoroughly well versed in its ways. And at least he would be forced to recognise that his proposal had been little short of an absurdity. She wanted him to see that, as she wanted nothing else on earth.

"You think it would bore you?" asked Fletcher.

"No," she said, flushing slightly; "I think I should like it."

"Well done!" he said, with quiet approval. "You are such a hermit, Mrs. Denvers, that it will be quite a novelty for us both."

She met his eyes for an instant, assailed by a sudden memory of Lord Ronald's vague remarks concerning him. But they were very level, and revealed nothing whatever. She told herself indignantly that there was nothing to reveal. The man had simply made her a friendly offer, and she determined to accept it in a like spirit.

"It was kind of you to think of it," she said. "I will come with much pleasure."

On her other side she heard Lord Ronald's leisurely tones conversing with his neighbour, and wondered if aught of the project had reached him. She hoped it had, though the serenity of his demeanour made her doubtful. But in any case he would surely know sooner or later.

III

Major Fletcher was well versed in the ways of natives, and as they drove in his high dog cart to Farabad a few days later, he imparted to his companion a good deal of information regarding them of which, till then, he had been quite ignorant.

He succeeded in arousing her interest, and the long drive down the hill-side in the early morning gave her her keenest enjoyment. She had been feeling weary and depressed of late, a state of affairs which could not fairly be put down to the score of ill-health. She had tried hard to ignore it, but it had obtruded itself upon her notwithstanding, and she was glad of the diversion which this glimpse of native life afforded her. Of Lord Ronald she had seen nothing for over a week. He had left Kumlaghat on the day following the dinner-party, dropping unobtrusively, without farewell, out of her life. She had told herself a dozen times, and vehemently, that she was glad of it, but the humiliating fact remained that she missed him—missed him at every turn; when

she rode, when she danced, when she went out in her rickshaw, and most of all in her drawing-room.

She had grown so accustomed to the sight of the thick-set, unromantic figure swinging lazily to and fro on her sorely tried music stool, watching her with serene grey eyes that generally held a smile. She wished she had not been quite so severe. She had not meant to send him quite away. As a friend, his attitude of kindly admiration was all that could be desired. And he was so safe, too, so satisfactorily solid. She had always felt that she could say what she liked to him without being misunderstood. Well, he had gone, and as they finally alighted, and went forward on foot through the fair, she resolutely dismissed him from her mind.

She made one or two purchases under Fletcher's guidance, which meant that she told him what she wanted and stood by while he bargained for her in Hindustani, an amusing business from her point of view.

Undoubtedly she was beginning to enjoy herself when he surprised her by turning from one of these unintelligible colloquies, and offering for her acceptance a beautifully wrought gold filigree bracelet.

She looked at him blankly, not without a vague feeling of dismay.

"Won't you have it?" he said. "Won't you permit me this small favour?"

She felt the colour go out of her face. It was so unexpected, this from him—in a fashion, almost staggering. For some reason she had never regarded this man as a possible admirer. She felt as if the solid ground had suddenly quaked beneath her.

"I would rather not," she said at last, avoiding his eyes instinctively. "Please don't think me ungracious. I know you mean to be kind."

"If you really believe that," said Fletcher, smiling faintly, "I don't see your objection."

The blood rushed back in a burning wave to her face. She, who prided herself upon being a woman of the world, blushed hotly, overwhelmingly, like any self-conscious girl.

"I would rather not," she repeated, with her eyes upon the ground.

But Fletcher was not to be turned lightly from his purpose.

"I wouldn't distress you for the world, Mrs. Denvers," he said, "but don't you think you are a trifle unreasonable? No one expects a woman in your position to be a slave to convention. I would never have bought the thing had I dreamed that it could be an offence."

There was a tinge of reproach in his voice, no more, but she felt inexplicably ashamed as she heard it. She looked up sharply, and the conviction that she was making herself ridiculous swept quickly upon her. He held out her hand to him, and mutely suffered him to slip the bangle on to her wrist.

IV

A curious rattling sound made them turn sharply the next moment, and even though it proved to be the warning signal of an old snake-charmer, Beryl welcomed the diversion. She looked at the man with a good deal of interest, notwithstanding her repulsion. He was wrapped in a long, very dirty, white *chuddah*, from which his face peered weirdly forth, wrinkled and old, almost supernaturally old, she thought to herself. It was very strangely adorned with red paint, which imparted to the eyes a ghastly pale appearance in the midst of the swarthy skin. A wiry grey beard covered the lower part of the face, and into this he was crooning a tuneless and wholly unintelligible song, while he squatted on the ground in front of a large, covered basket.

"He has got a cobra there," Fletcher said, and took Beryl's arm quietly.

She moved slightly, with a latent wish that he would take his hand away. But natives were beginning to crowd and press about them to see the show, and she realised that his action was dictated by necessity.

"Shall I take you away before we get hemmed in?" he asked her once.

But she shook her head. A nameless fascination impelled her to remain.

Even when the snake charmer shot forth a dusky arm and clawed the basket open, she showed no sign of fear, though Fletcher's hold upon her tightened to a grip. They seemed to be the only Europeans in all that throng, but that fact also she had forgotten. She could think of nothing but the crouching native before her, and the basket in which some living, moving thing lay enshrouded.

Closely she watched the active fingers, alert and sensitive, feeling over the dingy cloth they had exposed. Suddenly, with a movement too swift to be followed, they rent the covering away, and on the instant, rearing upwards, she beheld a large snake.

A thrill of horror shot through her, so keen that it stabbed every pulse, making her whole body tingle. But there was no escape for her then, nor did she seek it. She had a most unaccountable feeling that this display was for her alone, that in some way it appealed to her individually; and she was no longer so much as conscious of Fletcher's presence at her side.

The charmer continued his crooning noise, and the great cobra swayed its inflated neck to and fro as though to some mysterious rhythm, the native with naked hand and arm seeming to direct it.

"Loathsome!" murmured a voice into Beryl's ear, but she did not hear it. Her whole intelligence was riveted upon the movements of the serpent and its master. It was a hideous spectacle, but it occupied her undivided attention. She had no room for panic.

Suddenly the man's crooning ceased, and on the instant the cobra ceased to sway. It seemed to gather itself together, was rigid for perhaps five seconds, and then—swift as a lightning flash—it struck.

A sharp cry broke from Beryl, but she never knew that she uttered it. All she was aware of was the ghastly struggle that ensued in front of her, the fierce writhing of the snake, the convulsive movements of the

old native, and, curiously distinct from everything else, an impression of some stringed instrument thrumming somewhere at the back of the crowd.

It all ended as unexpectedly as it had begun. The great reptile became suddenly inert, a lifeless thing; the monotonous crooning was resumed, proceeding as it were out of the chaos of the struggle, and round his neck and about his body the snake-charmer wound his vanquished foe.

The moment for *backsheesh* had arrived, and Beryl, coming suddenly out of her absorption, felt for her purse and awoke abruptly to the consciousness of a hand that gripped her arm.

She glanced at Fletcher, who at once slackened his hold. "Don't you give the fellow anything," he said, with a touch of peremptoriness, "I will."

She yielded, considering the matter too trivial for argument, and watched his rupee fall with a tinkle upon the tin plate which the snake-charmer extended at the length of his sinewy arm.

Fletcher speedily made a way for her through the now shifting crowd; and after a little they found the *saice*, waiting with the mare under a tree. The animal was tormented by flies and restless. Certainly in this valley district it was very hot.

"We will go back by the hill road," Fletcher said, as he handed her up. "It is rather longer, but I think it is worth it. This blaze is too much for you."

They left the thronged high road, and turned up a rutty track leading directly into the hills.

Their way lay between great, glaring boulders of naked rock. Here and there tufts of grass grew beside the stony track, but they were brown and scorched, and served only to emphasise the barrenness of the land.

For a while they drove in silence, mounting steadily the whole time.

Suddenly Fletcher spoke. "We shall come to some shade directly. There is a belt of pine trees round the next curve."

The words were hardly uttered when unexpectedly

the mare shied, struck the ground violently with all four feet together, and bolted.

Beryl heard an exclamation from the native groom, and half turned to see him clinging to the back with a face of terror. She herself was more astonished than frightened. She gripped the rail instinctively, for the cart was jolting horribly as the mare, stretched out like a greyhound, fled at full gallop along the stony way.

She saw Fletcher, with his feet against the board, dragging backwards with all his strength. He was quite white, but exceedingly collected, and she was instantly quite certain that he knew what he was about.

There followed a few breathless moments of headlong galloping, during which they swayed perilously from side to side, and were many times on the verge of being overturned. Then, the ground rising steeply, the mare's wild pace became modified, developed into a spasmodic canter, became a difficult trot, finally slowed to a walk.

Fletcher pulled up altogether, and turned to the silent woman beside him. "Mrs. Denvers, you are splendid!" he said simply.

She laughed rather tremulously. The tension over, she was feeling very weak.

The *saïce* was already at the mare's head, and Fletcher let the reins go. He dismounted without another word and went round to her side. Still silent, he held up his hands to her and lifted her down as though she had been a child. He was smiling a little, but he was still very pale.

As for Beryl, the moment her feet touched the ground she felt as if the whole world had turned to liquid and were swimming around her in a gigantic whirlpool of floating impressions.

"Ah, you are faint!" she heard him say.

And she made a desperate and quite futile effort to assure him that she was nothing of the sort. But she knew that no more than a blur of sound came from her lips, and even while she strove to make herself intelligible the floating world became a dream, and darkness fell upon her.

V

Gradually, very gradually, the mists cleared from Beryl's brain, and she opened her eyes dreamily, and stared about her with a feeling that she had been asleep for years. She was lying propped upon carriage-cushions in the shade of an immense boulder, and as she discovered this fact, memory flashed swiftly back upon her. She had fainted, of course, in her foolish, weak, womanly fashion. But where was Major Fletcher? The heat was intense, so intense that breathing in that prone position seemed impossible. Gasping, she raised herself. Surely she was not absolutely alone in this arid wilderness!

She was not. In an instant she realised this, and wonder rather than fear possessed her.

There, squatting on his haunches, not ten paces from her, was the old snake-charmer. His basket was by his side; his *chudlak* drooped low over his face; he sat quite motionless, save for a certain palsied quivering, which she had observed before. He looked as if he had been in that place and attitude for many years.

Beryl leaned her head upon her hand and closed her eyes. She was feeling spent and sick. He did not inspire her with horror, this old man. She was conscious of a faint sensation of disgust, that was all.

A few seconds later she looked up again, wondering afresh whither her escort could have betaken himself. It seemed to her that the distance between herself and the old native had dwindled somewhat, but she did not bestow much attention upon him. She merely noted how fiercely the sun beat down upon his shrouded head, and wondered how he managed to endure it.

The next time she opened her eyes, there were scarcely three yards between them. The instant her look fell upon him he began to speak in a thin, wiry voice of great humility.

"Let the gracious lady pardon her servant," he said

in perfect English. "He would not harm a hair of her head."

She raised herself to an upright position with an effort. Very curiously she did not feel in the least afraid. By an abrupt intuition, wholly inexplicable, she knew that the man had something to tell her.

"What is it?" she said.

He cringed before her.

"Let my gracious lady have patience. It is no boon that her servant would desire of her. He would only speak a word of warning in the *mem-sahib's* ear."

Beryl had begun to give him her full attention. She had a feeling that she had seen the man somewhere before, but where and under what circumstances she could not recall. It was no moment for retrospection, and the phantom eluded her.

"What is it?" she said again, studying him with knitted brows.

He bowed himself before her till he appeared to be no more than a bundle of dirty linen.

"Let the gracious lady be warned by her servant," he said. "Fletcher *sahib* is a man of evil heart."

Beryl's eyes widened. Assuredly this was the last thing she had expected to hear from such a source.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He grovelled before her, his head almost in the dust.

"*Mem-sahib*, he has gone for water, but he will soon return. And he will lie to the gracious lady, and tell her that the shaft of the carriage is broken so that he cannot take her back. But it is not so, most gracious. The shaft is cracked, indeed, but it is not beyond repair. Moreover, it was cracked by the *sahib* at his master's bidding, while the *mem-sahib* was at the fun."

He paused; but Beryl said nothing. She was listening to the whole story in speechless, unfeigned astonishment.

"Also," her informant proceeded, "the *sahib's* mare was frightened, not by an accident, but by a trick. It was the *sahib's* will that she should run away. And he chose this road so that he might be far from habitation, well knowing that for every mile on the lower road there

are two miles to be travelled on this. *Mem-sahib*, your servant has spoken, and he prays you to beware. There is danger in your path."

"But—but," gasped Beryl, "how do you know all this? What makes you tell me? You can't know what you are saying!"

She was thoroughly frightened by this time, and heat and faintness were alike forgotten. Incredible as was the story to which she had listened, there was about it a vividness that made it terrifying.

"But I don't understand," she said helplessly, as the snake-charmer remained silent to her questions. "It is not possible! It could not be!"

He lifted his head a little and, from the depths of the *chukdah*, she knew that piercing eyes surveyed her.

"*Mem-sahib*," he said, "your servant knew that this would happen, and he came here swiftly by a secret way to warn you. More, he knows that when Fletcher *sahib* returns, he will speak lightly of the accident, so that the *mem-sahib* will have no fear. 'A broken shaft is soon mended,' he will say. 'My servant has returned to Farabad—to a man he knows. We will rest under the trees but a furlong from this place till he comes back.' But, most gracious, he will not come back. There is no place at Farabad at this time of the fair where the work could be done. Moreover, the *saice* has his orders, and he will not seek one. He will go back to Kundaghat with the mare, but he will walk all the way. It is fifteen miles from here by the road. He will not reach it ere nightfall. He will not return till after the darkness falls, and then he will miss the road. He will not find Fletcher *sahib* and the gracious lady before the sunrise."

Thus, in brief but telling sentences, the old native revealed to the white-faced woman before him the whole abominable plot. She listened to him in a growing agony of doubt. Could it be? Was it by any means possible that Fletcher, desiring to win her, but despairing of lessening the distance she maintained between them by any ordinary method, had devised

this foul scheme of compromising her in the eyes of society in order to force her to accept him?

Her cheeks burned furiously at the intolerable suspicion. It made her wholly forget that the man before her was an evil-looking native of whom she knew nothing whatever.

With sudden impulse she turned and bestowed her full confidence upon him, the paint-smeared face and mumbling beard notwithstanding.

"You must help me," she said imperiously. "You have done so much. You must do more. Tell me how I am to get back to Kundaghat."

He made a deferential gesture.

"The *mem-sahib* cannot depart before the major *sahib* returns," he said. "Let her therefore be faint once more, and let him minister to her. Let her hear his story, and judge if her servant has spoken truly. Then let the gracious lady go with him into the shade of the pine trees on the hill. When she is there let her discover that she has left behind her some treasure that she values—such as the golden bangle that is on the *mem-sahib's* wrist. Let her show distress, and Fletcher *sahib* shall come back to seek it. Then let her listen for the scream of a jay, and rise up and follow it. It will lead her by a safe and speedy way to Kundaghat. It will be easy for the *mem-sahib* to say afterwards that she began to wander and lost her way, till at last she met an aged man who guided her."

Yes, quite easy. She assimilated this subtle suggestion, for the first time in her life welcoming craft. Of the extreme risk of the undertaking she was too agitated to think. To get away was her one all-possessing desire.

While she thus desperately reviewed the situation, the snake-charmer began, with much grunting and mowing, to gather himself together for departure. She watched him, feeling that she would have gladly detained him had that been possible. Slowly, with palsied movements, he at length arose and took up his basket, doubled himself up before her with an almost ludicrous excess of deference, and finally hobbled away.

VI

There fell a step upon the parched earth, and, with a start, Beryl turned her head. She had seated herself again, but it was impossible to feign limpness with every pulse at the gallop. She looked up at Fletcher with a desperate smile.

He wore a knotted handkerchief on his head to protect it from the sun, and in his hat, which he balanced with great care in both hands, he carried water.

"I am glad to see you looking better," he said as he reached her. "I am afraid there isn't much more than a cupful left. I had to go nearly half a mile to get it, and it has been running out steadily all the way back."

He knelt down before her, deep concern on his sun-burnt face. Reluctantly, out of sheer gratitude, she dipped her handkerchief in the tepid drain, and bathed her face and hands.

"I am so sorry to give you all this trouble," she murmured.

He smiled with raised brows.

"I think I ought to say that. You will never trust yourself to me again after this experience."

She looked at him with a guilty sense of duplicity.

"I—scarcely see how you were to blame for it," she said, rather faintly.

He surveyed her for a moment in silence. Then, "I hardly know how to break it to you," he said. "I am afraid the matter is rather more serious than you think."

She forced a smile. This delicate preparation was far more difficult to endure than the actual calamity to which it paved the way.

"Please don't treat me like a coward," she said. "I know I was foolish enough to faint, but it was not so much from fright as from the heat."

"You behaved splendidly," he returned, his dark eyes still intently watching her. "But this is not so

much a case for nerve as for resignation. "Mrs. Denvers, you will never forgive me, I know. That jump of the mare's damaged one of the shafts. The wonder is it didn't break altogether. I have had to send the *saice* back to Farabad to try and get it patched up, and there is very little chance of our getting back to Kundaghat for two or three hours to come."

All the time that he was communicating this tragic news, Beryl's eyes were upon his face. She paid no heed to his scrutiny. Simply, with absolute steadiness, she returned it.

And she detected nothing, nothing but the most earnest regret, the most courteous anxiety regarding her welfare. Could it all be a monstrous lie, she asked herself? And yet it was to the smallest detail the story she had been warned to expect.

"But surely," she said, at last, "we cannot be so very far from Kundaghat?"

"No great distance as the crow flies," said Fletcher, "but a good many miles by road. I am afraid there is nothing for it but to wait till the mischief is repaired. My only comfort is that you will feel the heat less in returning later in the day. There are some pine trees on the other side of the rise where you can rest. If I had only brought something to eat I should have less cause to blame myself. As it is, do you think you will be able to hold out?"

She smiled at that.

"Oh, I am not starving yet," she said, with more assurance; "but I do not see the use of sitting still under the circumstances. I am quite rested now. Let us walk back to Farabad, and we might start on foot along the lower road for Kundaghat, and tell your man to overtake us."

Notwithstanding the resolution she infused into her voice, she made the proposal somewhat breathlessly, for she knew—in her heart she knew—that it would be instantly negatived.

And so it was. His face expressed sharp surprise for a second, developing into prompt remonstrance.

"My dear Mrs. Denvers, in this heat! You have not

Fletcher threw himself down upon the ground. "We can watch the road from here," he remarked. "We should see the dog cart about a mile away."

This was true. Barren, stony, and deserted, the road twisted in and out below them, visible from that elevation for a considerable distance. Beryl looked over it in silence. Her heart was beating in great suffocating throbs, while she strove to summon her resolution. Could she do this thing? Dared she? On the other hand, could she face the alternative risk? Her face burned fiercely yet again as she thought of it.

Furtively she began to study the man stretched out upon the ground close to her, and a sudden, surging regret went through her. If only it had been Lord Ronald lounging there beside her, how utterly different would have been her attitude! Fresh and inept he might be—he was—but, as he himself had comfortably remarked, a man might be wooed. She trusted him implicitly, every one trusted him. It was impossible to do otherwise.

Had anyone accused him of laying a trap for her, she would have treated the suggestion as too contemptible for notice. A sharp sigh escaped her. Why had he taken her so promptly at her word? He could never have seriously cared for her. Probably it was not in him to care.

"You are not comfortable?" said Fletcher.

She started at the sound of his voice, and with desperate impulse took action before her courage could fail her.

"Major Fletcher, I have lost the bangle you gave me. It slipped off down by that big rock when I was feeling ill. And I must have left it there. Should you very much mind fetching it for me?"

She felt her face grow crimson as she made the request, and she could not look at him, knowing too well what he would think of her confusion. She felt, indeed, as if she could never look him in the face again.

Fletcher sat quite still for a few seconds. Then, "But it's of no consequence, is it?" he said. "I will fetch it for you, of course, if you like, but I could

give you fifty more like it. And in any case we can find it when Subdul comes with the dog-cart."

He was reluctant to leave her. She saw it instantly, and tingled at the discovery. With a great effort she made her final attempt.

"Please," she said, with downcast eyes, "I want it now."

He was on his feet at once, looking down at her. "I will fetch it with the greatest pleasure," he said.

And, not waiting for her thanks, he turned and left her.

VII

For many seconds after his departure Beryl sat quite rigid, watching his tall figure pass swiftly downwards through the trees. She did not stir till he had reached the road, then, with a sudden deep breath, she rose.

At the same instant there sounded behind her, high up the hill-side among the pine trees, the piercing scream of a jay.

It startled her, for she had not been listening for it. All her thoughts had been concentrated upon the man below her. But this distant cry brought her back, and sharply she turned.

Again came the cry, unmusical, insistent. She glanced nervously around, but met only the bright eyes of a squirrel on a branch above her.

Again it came, arrogantly this time, almost imperiously. It seemed to warn her that there was no time for indecision. She felt as though some mysterious power were drawing her, and, gathering her strength, she began impetuously to mount the hill that stretched up behind her, covered with pine trees as far as she could see. It was slippery with pine needles, and she stumbled a good deal, but she faltered no longer in her purpose. She had done with indecision.

She had climbed some distance before she heard again the guiding signal. It sounded away to her right, and

she turned aside at once to follow it. In that instant, glancing downwards through the long, straight stems, she saw Fletcher far below, just entering the wood. Her heart leapt wildly at the sight. She almost stopped in her agitation. But the discordant bird-call sounded yet again, louder and more compelling than before, and she turned as a needle to a magnet and followed.

The growth of pine trees became denser as she proceeded. It seemed to close her in and swallow her. But only once again did fear touch her, and that was when she heard Fletcher's voice, very far away but unmistakable, calling to her by name.

With infinite relief, still following her unseen guide, at last she began to descend. The ground sloped sharply downwards, and creeping undergrowth began to make her progress difficult. She pressed on, however, and at length, hearing the tinkle of running water, realised that she was approaching one of the snow-fed mountain streams that went to swell the sacred waters that flowed by the temple of Farabad.

She plunged downwards eagerly, for she was hot and thirsty, coming out at last upon the brink of a stream that gurgled over stones between great masses of undergrowth.

"Will the *mem-sahib* deign to drink?" a deferential voice asked behind her.

She looked round sharply to see the old snake-charmer, bent nearly double with age and humility, meekly offering her a small, brass drinking-vessel.

His offer surprised her, knowing the Hindu's horror of a stranger's polluting touch, but she accepted it without question. Stooping, she scooped up a cupful of the clean water and drank.

The draught was cold as ice and refreshed her marvellously. She thanked him for it with a smile.

"And now?" she said.

He bowed profoundly, and taking the cup he washed it very carefully in the stream. Then, deprecatingly, he spoke.

"*Mem-sahib*, it is here that we cross the water."

She looked at the rushing stream with dismay. It

was not very wide but she saw at once that it was beyond a leap. She fancied that the swirling water in the middle indicated depth.

"Do you mean I must wade?" she asked.

He made a cringing gesture.

"There is another way, most gracious."

She gazed at him blankly.

"Another way?"

Again he bent himself.

"If the *mem-sahib* will so far trust her servant."

"But— but how?" she asked, somewhat breathlessly.

"You don't mean—you can't mean——"

"*Mem-sahib*," he said gently, "it will not be the first time that I have borne one of your race in my arms. I may seem old to you, most gracious, but I have yet the vigour of manhood. The water is swift but it is not deep. Let the *mem-sahib* watch her servant cross with the snake-basket, and she will see for herself that he speaks the truth. He will return for the *mem-sahib*, with her permission, and will bear her in safety to the farther bank, whence it is but an hour's journey on foot to Kundaghat."

There was a coaxing touch about all this which was not lost upon Beryl. He was horribly ugly, she thought to herself, with that hideous red smear across his dusky face; but in spite of this she felt no fear. Unprepossessing he might be, but he was in no sense formidable.

As she stood considering him he stooped and, lifting his basket, stepped with his sandalled feet into the stream. His long white garment trailed unheeded upon the water which rose above his knees as he proceeded.

Reaching the farther bank, he deposited his burden and at once turned back. Beryl was waiting for him. For some reason unknown even to herself, she had made up her mind to trust this old man.

"If the most gracious will deign to rest her arm upon my shoulder," he suggested, in his meek quaver.

And without further demur she complied.

The moment he lifted her she knew that his strength was fully equal to the venture. His arms were like steel springs. He grunted a little to himself as he

bore her across, but he neither paused nor faltered till he set her upon the bank.

"The *mem sahib* will soon see the road to Kundaghat," he observed then. "She has but three miles yet to go."

"Only three miles to Kundaghat!" said ejaculated in amazement.

"Only three miles, most gracious!" For the first time a hint of pride was mingled with the humility in his ready voice. "The *mem sahib* has travelled hither by a way that few know."

Beryl was fairly amazed at the news. She had believed herself to be many miles away. She began to wonder if her friend in need would consider the few rupees she had left adequate reward for his pains. Since she had parted with Fletcher's girl, she reflected that she had nothing else to bestow.

The way now lay uphill, and all undergrowth soon ceased. They came out at last through thinning pine trees upon the crest of the rise, and from here a considerable distance below, Beryl discerned the road along which she had travelled with Fletcher that morning.

White and glaring it stretched below her, till at last a grove of mango trees, which she remembered to be less than a mile from Kundaghat, closed about it, hiding it from view.

"The *mem sahib* will need her servant no more," said her guide, pausing slightly behind her while she studied the landscape at her feet with the road that wound through the valley.

She took out her purse quickly, and shook its contents into her hand. He had been as good as his word, but she knew she had but little to offer him unless he would accompany her all the way to Kundaghat. She stopped to count the money before she turned—two rupees and eight annas. It did not seem a very adequate reward for the service he had rendered her.

With this thought in her mind she slowly turned.

"This is all I have with me—" she began to say, and broke off with the words half uttered.

She was addressing empty air! The snake-charmer had vanished.

She stood staring blankly. She had not been aware of any movement. It was as if the earth had suddenly and silently gaped and swallowed him while her back was turned.

In breathless astonishment she moved this way and that, searching for him among the trees that seemed to grow too sparsely to afford a screen. But she searched in vain. He had clean gone, and had taken his repulsive pet with him.

Obviously, then, he had not done this thing for the sake of reward.

A sense of uneasiness began to possess her, and she started at last upon her downward way, feeling as if the place were haunted.

With relief she reached the road at length, and commenced the last stage of the return journey. The heat was terrific. She was intensely weary, and beginning to be foot-sore. At a turn in the road she paused a moment, looking back at the pine-clad hill from which she had come; and as she did so, distinct, though far away behind her, there floated through the midday silence the curious note of a jay. It sounded to her bewildered senses like a cracked, discordant laugh.

VIII

On the following afternoon Major Fletcher called, but he was not admitted. Beryl was receiving no one that day, and sent him an uncompromising message to that effect. He lingered to inquire after her health, and, on being told that she had overtired herself and was resting, expressed his polite regret and withdrew.

After that, somewhat to Beryl's surprise, he came no more to the bungalow.

She remained in seclusion for several days after her adventure, so that fully a week passed before they met.

It was while out riding one morning with Mrs. Ellis that she first encountered him. The meeting was unexpected, and, conscious of a sudden rush of blood to

her cheeks, she bestowed upon him her haughtiest bow. His grave acknowledgment thereof was wholly without effrontery, and he made no attempt to speak to her.

"Have you quarrelled with the Major?" asked Nina, as they rode on.

"Of course not," Beryl answered, with a hint of impatience.

But she knew that if she wished to appear at her ease she must not be too vexed. She felt a very decided reluctance to take her friend into her confidence with regard to the Farabad episode. There were times when she wondered herself if she were altogether justified in condemning Major Fletcher unheard, in spite of the evidence against him. But she had no intention of giving him an opportunity to vindicate himself if she could possibly avoid doing so.

In this, however, circumstances proved too strong for her. They were bound to meet sooner or later, and Fate ordained that when this should occur she should be more or less at his mercy.

The occasion was an affair of some importance, being a reception at the palace of the native prince who dwelt at Farabad. It promised to be a function of supreme magnificence; it was, in fact, the chief event of the season, and the Anglo-Indian society of Kundaghat attended it in force.

Beryl went with the Commissioner and his wife, but in the crowd of acquaintances that surrounded her almost from the moment of her arrival she very speedily drifted away from them. One after another claimed her attention, and almost before she knew it she found herself moving unattached through the throng.

She was keenly interested in the brilliant scene about her. Flashing jewels and gorgeous costumes made a glittering wonderland, through which she moved as one beneath a spell. The magic of the East was everywhere; it filled the atmosphere as with a heavy fragrance.

She had withdrawn a little from the stream of guests, and was standing slightly apart, watching the gorgeous spectacle in the splendidly lighted hall, when a tall

sure, dressed in regimentals, came quietly up and stood beside her.

With a start she recognised Fletcher. He bent towards her instantly, and spoke.

"I trust that you have now quite recovered from our fatigue, Mrs. Denvers."

She controlled her flush before it had time to overwhelm her.

"Quite, thank you," she replied, speaking stiffly because she could not at the moment bring herself to lo otherwise.

He stood beside her for a space in silence, and she wondered greatly what was passing in his mind.

At length, "May I take you to have some supper?" he asked. "Or would you care to go outside? The gardens are worth a visit."

Beryl hesitated momentarily. To have supper with him meant a prolonged *tête à tête*, whereas merely to go outside for a few minutes among a host of people could not involve her in any serious embarrassment. She could leave him at any moment if she desired. She was sure to see some of her acquaintances. Moreover, to seem to avoid him would make him think she was afraid of him, and her pride would not permit this possibility.

"Let us go outside for a little, then," she said.

He offered her his arm, and the next moment was leading her through a long, thickly-carpeted passage to a flight of marble steps that led downwards into the palace garden.

He did not speak at all; and she, without glancing at him, was aware of a very decided constraint in his silence. She would not be disconcerted by it. She was determined to maintain a calm attitude; but her heart quickened a little in spite of her. She saw that he had chosen an exit that would lead them away from the crowd.

Dumbly they descended the steps, Fletcher unhesitatingly drawing her forward. The garden was a marvel of many coloured lights, intricate and bewildering as a maze. Its paths were all carpeted, and their feet made no sound. It was like a dream-world.

Here and there were nooks and glades of deepest shadow. Through one of these, without a pause, Fletcher led her, emerging at length into a wonderful fairyland where all was blue in twilight haunt, where countless tiny globes of light nestled like sapphires upon every shrub and tree, and a slender fountain rose and fell tinkling in a shallow basin of blue stone.

A small arbour, domed and pillared like a temple, stood beside the fountain, and as they ascended its marble steps a strong scent of sandalwood fell like a haze of incense upon Beryl's senses.

There was no light within the arbour, and on the threshold instinctively she stopped short. They were as much alone as if miles instead of yards separated them from the buzzing crowd about the palace.

Instantly Fletcher spoke.

"Go in, won't you? It isn't really dark. There is probably a couch with rugs and cushions."

There was, and she sat down upon it, sinking so low in downy luxuriance that she found herself resting not far from the floor. But, looking out through the marble latticework into the blue twilight, she was somewhat reassured. Though thick foliage obscured the stars, it was not really dark, as he had said.

Fletcher seated himself upon the top step, almost touching her. He seemed in no hurry to speak.

The only sound that broke the stillness was the babble of the fountain, and from far away the titling strains of a band of stringed instruments.

Slowly at length he turned his head, just as his silence was becoming too oppressive to be borne.

"Mrs. Denvers," he said, his voice very deliberate and even, "I want to know what happened that day at Farabad to make you decide that I was not a fit escort for you."

It had come, then. He meant to have a reckoning with her. A sharp tingle of dismay went through her as she realised it. She made a quick effort to assert his suspicion.

"I wandered, and lost my way," she said. "And then I met an old native, who showed me a short cut. I ought, perhaps, to have written and explained."

"That was not all that happened," Fletcher responded gravely. "Of course, you can refuse to tell me any more. I am absolutely at your mercy. But I do not think you will refuse. It isn't treating me quite fairly, is it, to keep me in the dark?"

She saw at once that to fence with him further was out of the question. Quite plainly he meant to bring her to book. But she felt painfully unequal to the ordeal before her. She was conscious of an almost physical sense of shrinking.

Nevertheless, as he waited, she nerved herself at length to speak.

"What makes you think that something happened?"

"It is fairly obvious, is it not?" he returned quietly. "I could not very easily think otherwise. If you will allow me to say so, your device was not quite subtle enough to pass muster. Even had you dropped that bangle by inadvertence—which you did not—you would not, in the ordinary course of things, have sent me off post haste to recover it."

"No?" she questioned, with a faint attempt to laugh.

"No," he rejoined, and this time she heard a note of anger, deep and unmistakable, in his voice.

She drew herself together as it reached her. It was to be a battle, then, and instinctively she knew that she would need all her strength.

"Well," she said finally, affecting an assurance she was far from feeling. "I have no objection to your knowing what happened since you have asked. In fact, perhaps—as you suggest—it is scarcely fair that you should not know."

"Thank you," he responded, with a hint of irony.

But she found it difficult to begin, and she could not hide it from him, for he was closely watching her.

He softened a little as he perceived this.

"Pray don't be agitated," he said. "I do not for a moment question that your reason for what you did was a good one. I am only asking you to tell me what it was."

"I know," she answered. "But it will make you angry, and that is why I hesitate."

He leaned towards her slightly.

"Can it matter to you whether I am angry or not?"

She shivered a little.

"I never offend anyone if I can help it. I think it is a mistake. However, you have asked for it. What happened was this. It was when you left me to get some water. An old man, a native, came and spoke to me. Perhaps I was foolish to listen, but I could scarcely have done otherwise. And he told me—he told me that the accident to the dog cart was not—not——" She paused, searching for a word.

"Genuine," suggested Fletcher very quietly.

She accepted the word. The narration was making her very nervous.

"Yes, genuine. He told me that the *saïe* had cracked the shaft beforehand, that there was no possibility of getting it repaired at Parabad, that he would have to return to Kundaghat and might not, probably would not, come back for us before the following morning."

Haltingly, rather breathlessly, the story came from her lips. It sounded monstrous as she uttered it. She could not look at Fletcher, but she knew that he was angry; something in the intense stiffness of his attitude told her this.

"Please go on," he said, as she paused. "You undertook to tell me the whole truth, remember."

With difficulty she continued.

"He told me that the mare was frightened by a trick, that you chose the hill road because it was lonely and difficult. He told me exactly what you would say when you came back. And—and you said it."

"And that decided you to play a trick upon me and escape?" questioned Fletcher. "Your friend's suggestion, I presume?"

His words fell with cold precision; they sounded as if they came through his teeth.

She assented almost inaudibly. He made her feel contemptible.

"And afterwards?" he asked relentlessly.

She made a final effort ; there was that in his manner that frightened her.

"Afterwards, he gave a signal—it was the cry of a jay—for me to follow. And he led me over the hill to a stream where he waited for me. We crossed it together, and very soon after he pointed out the valley-road below us, and left me."

"You rewarded him?" demanded Fletcher swiftly.

"No; I was prepared to do so, but he disappeared."

"What was he like?"

She hesitated.

"Mrs. Denver!" His tone was peremptory.

"I do not feel bound to tell you that," she said in a low voice.

"I have a right to know it," he responded firmly.

And after a moment she gave in. The man was probably far away by this time. She knew that the fair was over.

"It was the old snake-charmer."

"The man we saw at Farabad?"

"Yes."

Fletcher received the information in silence, and several seconds dragged away while he digested it. She even began to wonder if he meant to say anything further, almost expecting him to get up and stalk away, too furious for speech.

But at length, very unexpectedly and very quietly, he spoke.

"Would it be of any use for me to protest my innocence?"

She did not know how to answer him.

He proceeded with scarcely a pause:

"It seems to me that my guilt has been taken for granted in such a fashion that any attempt on my part to clear myself would be so much wasted effort. It simply remains for you to pass sentence."

She hit her head for the first time, startled out of all comparison. His cool treatment of the matter was more disconcerting than any vehement protestations. It was almost as though he acknowledged the offence

and swept it aside with the same breath as of no account. Yet it was incredible, this view of the case. There must be some explanation. He would never dare to insult her thus.

Impulsively she rose, inaction becoming unendurable. He stood up instantly, and they faced one another in the weird blue twilight.

"I think I have misunderstood you!" she said breathlessly, and there stopped dead, for something—something in his face arrested her.

The words froze upon her lips. She drew back with a swift, instinctive movement. In one flashing second of revelation unmistakably she knew that she had done him no injustice. Her eyes had met his, and had sunk dismayed before the fierce passion that had flamed back at her.

In the pause that followed she heard her own heart-beats, quick and hard, like the flying feet of a hunted animal. Then—for she was a woman, and instinct guided her—she covered up her sudden fear, and faced him with stately courage.

"Let us go back," she said.

"You have nothing to say to me?" he asked.

She shook her head in silence, and made as if to depart.

But he stood before her, hemming her in. He did not appear to notice her gesture.

"But I have something to say to you!" he said. And in his voice, for all its quietness, was a note that made her tremble. "Something to which I claim it as my right that you should listen."

She faced him proudly, though she was white to the lips.

"I thought you had refused to plead your innocence," she said.

"I have," he returned. "I do. But yet——"

"Then I will not hear another word," she broke in.

"Let me pass!"

She was splendid as she stood there confronting him, perhaps more splendid than she had ever been before. He had reached the ripe beauty of her womanhood, he would never be more magnificent than she was at

gloom, and it was set and devilish, bestial in its cruelty. The other—the other—she stared and gasped and stared again—the other, beyond all possibility of doubt, was the ancient snake-charmer of Parabad.

Yet it was he who cursed—and cursed in excellent English—with a fluency that none but English lips could possibly have achieved. And the reason for his eloquence was not far to seek. For he was being thrashed, thrashed scientifically, mercilessly, and absolutely thoroughly—by the man whom he had dared to thwart.

He was draped as before in his long native garment—and this, though it hung in tatters, hampered his movements, and must have placed him at a hopeless disadvantage even had he not been completely outmatched in the first place.

Standing on the steps above them, Beryl took in the whole situation, and in a trice her own weakness was a thing of the past. Amazed, incredulous, bewildered as she was, the urgent need for action drove all questioning from her mind. There was no time for that. With a cry, she sprang downwards.

And in that instant Fletcher delivered a smashing blow with the whole of his strength, and struck his opponent down.

He fell with a thud, striking his head against the marble of the fountain, and to Beryl's horror he did not rise again. He simply lay as he had fallen, with arms flung wide and face upturned, motionless, maimed as a thing of stone.

In an agony she dropped upon her knees beside him. "You brute!" she cried to Fletcher. "Oh, you brute!"

She heard him laugh in answer, a fierce and cruel laugh, but she paid no further heed to him. She was trying to raise the fallen man, dabbing the blood that ran from a cut on his temple, lifting his head to lie in the hollow of her arm. Her incredulity had wholly passed. She knew him now beyond all question. He would never manage to deceive her again.

"Speak to me! Oh, do speak to me!" she

entreated. "Ronald, open your eyes! Please open your eyes!"

"He is only stunned." It was Fletcher's voice above her. "Leave him alone. He will soon come to his senses. Serves him right for acting the clown in this get-up."

She looked up sharply at that and a perfect tempest of indignation took possession of her, banishing all fear.

"What he did," she said, in a voice that shook uncontrollably, "was for my sake alone, that he might be able to protect me from cads and blackguards. I refuse to leave him like this, but the sooner you go, the better. I will never—never as long as I live—speak to you again!"

Her blazing eyes, and the positive fury of her voice, must have carried conviction to the most obtuse, and this Fletcher certainly was not. He stood a moment, looking down at her with an insolence that might have frightened her a little earlier, but which now she met with a new strength that he felt himself powerless to dominate. She was not thinking of herself at all just then, and perhaps that was the secret of her ascendancy. His own brute force crumbled to nothing before it, and he knew that he was beaten.

Without a word he bowed to her, smiling ironically, and turned upon his heel.

She drew a great breath of relief as she saw him go. She felt as though a horrible oppression had passed out of the atmosphere. That fairy haunt with its bubbling fountain and sapphire lamps was no longer an evil place.

She bent again over her senseless companion.

"Ronald!" she whispered. "My dear, my dear, can't you hear me? Oh, if only you would open your eyes!"

She soaked her handkerchief in the water and held it to the wound upon his forehead. Even as she did it, she felt him stir, and the next moment his eyes were open, gazing straight up into her own.

"Damn the brute!" said Lord Ronald faintly.

"You are better?" she whispered thankfully.

His hand came upwards gropingly, and took the soaked handkerchief from her. He dabbed his face with it, and slowly, with her assistance, sat up.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"He has gone," she told him. "I—ordered him to go."

"Better late than never," said Lord Ronald thoughtfully.

He leaned upon the edge of the fountain, still mopping the blood from his face, till, suddenly feeling his beard, he stripped it off with a gesture of impatience.

"Afraid I must have given you a nasty shock," he said. "I didn't expect to be mauled like this."

"Please—please don't apologise," she begged him, with a sound that was meant for a laugh, but was in effect more like a sob.

He turned towards her in his slow way.

"I'm not apologising. Only—you know—I've taken something of a liberty, though, on my honour, it was well meant. If you can overlook that—"

"I shall never overlook it," she said tremulously.

He put the *chuddah* back from his head and regarded her gravely. His face was swollen and discoloured, but this fact did not in the smallest degree lessen the quaint self-assurance of his demeanour.

"Yes, but you mustn't cry about it," he said gently. "And you mustn't blame yourself either. I knew the fellow, remember; you didn't."

"I didn't know you, either," she said, sitting down on the edge of the fountain. "I—I've been a perfect fool!"

Silence followed this statement. She did not know quite whether she expected Lord Ronald to agree with her or to protest against the severity of her self-arraignment, but she found his silence peculiarly hard to bear.

She had almost begun to resent it, when suddenly, very softly, he spoke:

"It's never too late to mend, is it?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I almost think it is—at my age."

He dipped her handkerchief again in the fountain, and dabbed his face afresh. Then:

"Don't you think you might try?" he suggested, in his speculative drawl.

She shook her head rather drearily.

"I suppose I shall have to resign myself, and get a companion. I shall hate it, and so will the companion, but——"

"Think so?" said Lord Ronald. He laid his hand quietly on her knee. "Mrs. Denvers," he said, "I am afraid you thought me awfully impertinent when I suggested your marrying me the other day. It wasn't very ingenious of me, I admit. But what can you expect from a nonentity? Not brains, surely! I am not going to repeat the blunder. I know very well that I am no bigger than a peppercorn in your estimation, and we will leave it at that. But, you know, you are too young, you really are too young, to live alone. Now listen a moment. You trust me. You said so. You'll stick to that?"

"Of course," she said, wondering greatly what was coming.

"Then will you," he proceeded very quietly, "have me for a watch-dog until you marry again? I could make you an excellent silk servant, and I could go with you practically everywhere. Don't begin to laugh at the suggestion until you have thoroughly considered it. It could be done in such a way that no one would suspect. It matters nothing to anyone how I pass my time, and I may as well do something useful for once. I know at first sight it seems impossible, but it is nothing of the sort in reality. It isn't the first time I have faked as a native. I am Indian born, and I have spent the greater part of my life knocking about the Empire. The snake-taming business I picked up from an old bearer of mine—a very old man he is now and in the trade himself. I got him to lend me his most docile cobra. The thing was harmless, of course. But all this is beside the point. The point is, will you put up with me as a retainer, no more, until you find some one more worthy of the high honour of guarding you? I shall never, believe me, take advantage of your kindness. And on the day you marry again I shall resign my post."

She had listened to the amazing suggestion in unbroken silence, and even when he paused she did not at once speak. Her head was bent, almost as though she did not wish him to see her face—he, the peppercorn, the nonentity whose opinion mattered so little!

Yet as he waited, still with that quiet hand upon her as though to assure her of his solidity, his trustworthiness, she spoke at last, in a voice so small that it sounded almost humble.

"But, Lord Ronald, I—I may never marry again. My late marriage was—was such a grievous mistake. I was so young at the time, and—and——"

"Don't tell me," he said gently.

"But—but—if I never marry again?" she persisted.

"Then—unless, of course, you dismiss me—I shall be with you for all time," he said.

She made a slight, involuntary movement, and he took his hand away.

"Will you think it over before you decide?" he said. "I will come to you, as soon as I am presentable, for your answer. For the present, would you not be wise to go back to your friends? I am too disreputable to escort you, but I will watch you to the palace steps."

He got to his feet as he spoke. He was still absently mopping his face with the scrap of lace he had taken from her.

Beryl stood up also. She wanted to be gracious to him, but she was unaccountably shy. No words would come.

He waited courteously.

At last:

"Lord Ronald," she said with difficulty. "I know you are in earnest. But do you—do you really wish to be taken at your word?"

He raised his eyebrows as if the question slightly surprised him.

"Certainly," he said.

Still she stood hesitating.

"I wish you would tell me why," she said, almost under her breath.

"Why?" he repeated uncomprehendingly.

"Yes, why you wish to safeguard me in this fashion," she explained, in evident embarrassment.

"Oh, that!" he said slowly. "I suppose it is because I happen to care for your safety."

"Yes?" she murmured, still pausing.

He looked at her with his straight grey eyes that were so perfectly true and kind.

"That's all," he said, and smiled upon her reassuringly.

Beryl uttered a sharp sigh and let the matter drop. Nonentity though he might be, she would have given much for a glimpse of his inner soul just then.

X

For three days after the reception at Farabad Beryl Denvers returned to her seclusion, and during those three days she devoted the whole of her attention to the plan that Lord Ronald Prior had laid before her. It worried her a good deal. There were so many obstacles to its satisfactory fulfilment. She wished he had not been so pleasantly vague regarding his own feelings in the matter. Of course, it was a feather-brained scheme from start to finish, and yet in a fashion it attracted her. He was so splendidly safe, so absolutely reliable; she needed just such a protector. And yet—and yet—there were so many obstacles.

On the fourth day Lord Ronald's card was brought to her. He did not call at the conventional hour, and the reason for this was not hard to fathom. He had come for her final decision, and he desired to see her alone.

She did not know how to meet him or what to say, but it was useless to shirk the interview. She entered her drawing-room with decidedly heightened colour, even while telling herself that it was absurd to feel any embarrassment in his presence.

He was waiting for her on his favourite perch, the music-stool, swinging idly to and fro, with his customary serenity of demeanour. He moved to meet her with a quiet smile of welcome. A piece of strapping-plaster

across his left temple was all that remained of his recent disfigurement.

"I hope my visit is not premature," he remarked as he shook hands.

"Oh, no!" she answered somewhat nervously. "I expected you. Please sit down."

He subsided again upon the music stool, and there followed a silence which she found peculiarly disconcerting.

"You have been thinking over my suggestion?" he drawled at length.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I have." She paused a moment, then, "I am afraid it wouldn't answer," she said with an effort, "though I am very grateful to you for thinking of it. You see, there are so many obstacles."

"But not insurmountable, any of them," smiled Lord Ronald.

"I am afraid so," she said.

He looked at her.

"May I not hear what they are?"

She hesitated.

"For one thing, you know," she said, "one pays one's servants."

"Well, but you can pay me," he said simply. "I shall not ask very high wages. I am easily satisfied. I shouldn't call that an obstacle."

She laughed a little.

"But that isn't all. There is the danger of being found out. It—it would make it rather awkward, wouldn't it? People would talk."

"No one ever talks scandal of me," said Lord Ronald comfortably. "I am considered eccentric, but quite incapable of anything serious. I don't think you need be afraid. There really isn't the smallest danger of my being discovered, and even if I were, I could tell the truth, you know. People always believe what I say."

She smiled involuntarily at his simplicity, but she shook her head.

"It really wouldn't do," she said.

"What! More obstacles?" he asked.

"Yes, one—the greatest of all, in my opinion." She

got up and moved across the room, he pivoting slowly round to watch her.

She came to a stand by her writing-table, and began to turn over a packet of letters that lay there. She did it mechanically, with hands that shook a little. Her face was turned away from him.

He waited for a few seconds; then, as she still remained silent, he spoke.

"What is this last obstacle, Mrs. Denvers?"

She answered him with her head bent, her fingers still fluttering the papers before her.

"You," she said in a low voice. "You yourself."

"Me!" said Lord Ronald in evident astonishment.

She nodded without speaking.

"But—I'm sorry," he said pathetically, "I'm afraid I don't quite follow you. I am not famed for my wits, as you know."

She laughed at that, unexpectedly and quite involuntarily; and though she was instantly serious again the laugh served to clear away some of her embarrassment.

"Oh, but you are absurd," she said, "to talk like that. No dull-witted person could ever have done what you have been doing lately. Major Fletcher himself told me that day we went to Parabad that it needed sharp wits to pose as a native among natives. He also said——" She paused suddenly.

"Yes?" said Lord Ronald.

She glanced round at him momentarily.

"I don't know why I should repeat it. It is quite beside the point. He also said that it entailed a risk that no one would care to take unless—unless there was something substantial to be gained by it."

"Well, but there was," said Lord Ronald vaguely.

"Meaning my safety?" she questioned.

"Exactly," he said.

She became silent; but she fidgeted no longer with her papers. She was making up her mind to take a bold step.

"Lord Ronald," she said at last, "I am going to ask you a very direct—a horribly direct—question. Will

you answer me quite directly too? And—and—tell me the truth, even if it sounds rather brutal?"

There was an unmistakable appeal in her voice. With an effort she wheeled in her chair, and fully faced him. But she was so plainly distressed that even he could not fail to notice it.

"What is it?" he said kindly. "I will tell you the truth, of course. I always do."

"You promise?" she said very earnestly.

"Certainly I promise," he said.

"Then—you must forgive my asking, but I must know, and I can't find out in any other way—Lord Ronald, are you—are you in love with me?"

She saw the grey eyes widen in astonishment, and was conscious of a moment of overwhelming embarrassment; and then, slow and emphatic, his answer came, banishing all misgiving.

"But of course I am," he said. "I thought you knew."

She summoned to her aid an indignation she was far from feeling; she had to check her confusion somehow. "How could I possibly know?" she said. "You never told me."

"I asked you to marry me," he protested. "I thought you would take the other thing for granted."

She stood up abruptly, turning from him. It was impossible to keep up her indignation. It simply declined to carry her through.

"You—you are a perfect idiot!" she said shakily. And on the words she tried to laugh, but only succeeded in partially smothering a sob.

"Oh, I say!" said Lord Ronald. He got up awkwardly, and stood behind her. "Please don't take it to heart," he urged. "I shouldn't have told you, only—you know—you asked. And it wouldn't make any difference, on my honour it wouldn't. Won't you take my word for it, and give me a trial?"

"No," she said.

"Why not?" he persisted. "Don't you think you are rather hard on me? I shall never take a single inch more than you care to allow."

She turned upon him suddenly. Her cheeks were

HER HERO

I

THE AMERICAN COUSIN

"My dear child, it's absurd to be romantic over such a serious matter as marriage—the greatest mistake, I assure you. Nothing could be more suitable than an alliance with this very eligible young man. He plainly thinks so himself. If you are so unreasonable as to throw away this magnificent chance, I shall really feel inclined to give you up in despair."

The soft, drawling accents fell with a gentle sigh through the perfumed silence of the speaker's boudoir. She was an elderly woman, beautiful, with that delicate, china-like beauty that never fades from youth to age. Not even Lady Ratford's enemies had ever disputed the fact of her beauty—not even her stepdaughter, firmly though she despised her.

She sat behind the tea-table, this stepdaughter, dark and inscrutable, a grave, unresponsive listener. Her grey eyes never varied as Lady Ratford's protest came lispingly through the quiet room. She might have been turning over some altogether irrelevant problem at the back of her mind. It was this girl's way to hide herself behind a shield of apparent preoccupation when anything jarred upon her.

"I need scarcely tell you what it would mean to your father," went on the soft voice. "Ever since poor Mortimer's death it has fretted him terribly to think that the estates must pass out of the direct line. Indeed, he hardly feels that the present heir belongs

to the family at all. The American branch has always seemed so remote. But now that the young man is actually coming over to see his inheritance, it does seem such a Heaven-sent chance for you. You know, dear, it's your sixth season. You really ought to think seriously of getting settled. I am sure it would be a great weight off my mind to see you suitably married. And this young Cochrane is sure to take a reasonable view of the matter. Americans are so admirably practical. And, of course, if your father could leave all his money to the estates, as this marriage would enable him to do, it would be a very excellent arrangement for all concerned."

The girl at the tea-table made a slight—a very slight—movement that scarcely amounted to a gesture of impatience. The gentle drone of her stepmother's voice was becoming monotonous. But she said nothing whatever, and her expression did not change.

A faintly fretful note crept into Lady Raffold's tone when she spoke again.

"You're so unreasonable, Priscilla. I really haven't a notion what you actually want. You might have been a duchess by this time, as all the world knows, if you had only been reasonable. How is it—why is it—that you are so hard to please?"

Lady Priscilla raised her eyelids momentarily.

"I don't think you would understand, Charlotte, if I were to tell you," she said in a voice of such deep music that it seemed incapable of bitterness.

"Some ridiculous sentimentality, no doubt," said Lady Raffold.

"I am sure you would call it so."

A faint flush rose in the girl's dark face. She looked at her stepmother no longer, but began very quietly and steadily to make the tea.

Lady Raffold waited a few seconds for her confidence, but she waited in vain. Lady Priscilla had retired completely behind her shield, and it was quite obvious that she had no intention of exposing herself any further to stray shots.

Her stepmother was exasperated, but she found it

difficult to say anything more upon the subject in face of this impenetrability. She could only solace herself with the reflection that the American cousin, who had become heir to the earldom and estates of Ratfold, would almost certainly take a more common-sense view of the matter, and, if that were so, a little pressure from the girl's father, whom she idolised, would probably be sufficient to settle it according to her desires.

It was so plainly Priscilla's duty to marry the young man. The whole thing seemed to be planned and cut out by Providence. And it was but natural that Ralph Cochrane should see it in the same light. For it was understood that he was not rich, and it would be greatly to his interest to marry Earl Ratfold's only surviving child.

So Lady Ratfold reasoned to herself as Priscilla poured out the tea in serious silence, and she gradually soothed her own annoyance by the process.

"Come," she said at length, breaking a long silence, "I should think Ralph Cochrane will be in England in ten days at the latest. We must not be too formal with him as he is a relation. Shall we ask him to luncheon on the Sunday after next?"

Priscilla did not at once reply. When at length she looked up, it was with the air of one coming out of a reverie.

"Oh, yes, if you like, Charlotte," she said in her deep, quiet voice. "No doubt he will amuse you. I know you always enjoy Yankees."

"And you, my dear?" said Lady Ratfold, with just a hint of sharpness in her tone.

"I?" Again her stepdaughter paused a little, as if collecting her thoughts. "I shall not be here," she said finally. "I have decided to go down to Ratfold for midsummer week, and I don't suppose I shall hurry back. It won't matter, will it? I often think that you entertain best alone. And I am so tired of London heat and dust."

There was an unconscious note of wistfulness in the beautiful voice, but its dominant virtue was determination.

Lady Raffold realised at once to her unspeakable indignation that protest was useless.

"Really, Priscilla," was all she found to say, "I am amazed—yes, amazed—at your total lack of consideration."

But Priscilla was quite unimpressed.

"You won't have time to miss me," she said. "I don't think anyone will, except, perhaps, Dad; and he always knows where to find me."

"Your father will certainly not leave town before the end of the season," said Lady Raffold, raising her voice slightly.

"Poor dear Dad!" murmured Priscilla.

II

THE ROMANCE OF HER LIFE

"And so I escaped. Her ladyship didn't like it, but it was worth a tussle."

Priscilla leaned back luxuriously in the housekeeper's room at Ramold Abbey, and laughed upon a deep note of satisfaction. She had discarded all things fashionable with her departure from London in the height of the season. The crumpled linen hat she wore was designed for comfort and not for elegance. Her gown of brown holland was simplicity itself. She sat carelessly with her arm round the neck of an immense mastiff who had followed her in.

"I've cut everything, Froggy," she declared, "including the terrible Yankee cousin. In fact, it was almost more on his account than any other that I did it. For I can't and won't marry him, not even for the sake of the dear old Abbey! Are you very shocked, I wonder?"

Froggy the housekeeper—so named by young Lord Mortimer in his schoolboy days—looked up from her work and across at Priscilla, her brown, prominent eyes, to which she owed her sobriquet, shining lovingly behind her spectacles. Her real name was Mrs. Burrowes, but Priscilla could not remember a time when

she had ever called her anything but Froggy. The old familiar name had become doubly dear to both of them now that Mortimer was dead.

"I should be very shocked, indeed, darling, if it were otherwise," was Froggy's answer.

And Priscilla breathed a long sigh of contentment. She knew that there was no need to explain herself to this, her oldest friend.

She laid her cheek comfortably against the great dog's ear.

"No, Romeo," she murmured. "Your missis isn't going to be thrown at any man's head if she knows it. But it's a difficult world, old boy; almost an impossible world, I sometimes think. Froggy, I know you can be sentimental when you try. What should you do if you fell in love with a total stranger without ever knowing his name? Should you have the fidelity to live in single blessedness all your life for the sake of your hero?"

Froggy looked a little startled at the question, lightly as it was put. She felt that it was scarcely a problem that could be settled off hand. And yet something in Priscilla's manner seemed to indicate that she wanted a prompt reply.

"It is a little difficult to say, dear," she said, after brief reflection. "I can understand that one might be strongly attracted towards a stranger, but I should think it scarcely possible that one could go so far as to fall in love."

Priscilla uttered a faint, rueful laugh.

"Perhaps you couldn't, Froggy," she admitted. "But you know there is such a thing as loving at first sight. Some people go so far as to say that all true love begins that way."

She rose quietly and went to her friend's side.

"Oh, Froggy, it's very difficult to be true to your inner self when you stand quite alone," she said, "and every one else is thinking what a fool you are!" The words had an unwonted ring of passion in them, and having uttered them, she knelt down by Froggy's side and hid her face against the ample shoulder. "And

sometimes think I'm a fool myself," she ended, in muffled accents.

Froggy's arms closed instantly and protectingly around her.

"My darling, who is it, then?" whispered her motherly voice.

Priscilla did not at once reply. It was a difficult confidence to make. At last, haltingly, words came:

"It was years ago—that summer we went to New York, Dad and I. He was from the West, so I heard afterwards. He stayed at the same hotel with us, one of those quiet, unobtrusive, big men—not big physically, but—you understand. I might not have noticed him—I don't know—but one day a man in the street threw down a flaming match just as I was coming out of the hotel. I had on a muslin dress, and it caught fire. Of course, it blazed in a moment, and I was terrified. Dad wasn't there. But the man was in the balcony just overhead, and he swung himself down, I never saw how, and caught me in his arms. He had nothing to put it out with. He simply threw me down and flung himself on the top, beating out the flames in all directions with his hands. I was dreadfully upset, of course, but I wasn't much hurt. He was—horribly. One of his hands was all charred.

"He carried me back into the hotel and told me not to be frightened. And he stayed with me till I felt better, because somehow I wanted him to. He was so strong, Froggy, and so kind. He had a voice like a woman's. I've thought since that he must have thought me very foolish and uncontrolled. But he seemed to understand just how I felt. And—do you know—I never saw him again! He went right away that very afternoon, and we never found out who he was. Some one said he had been a cowboy, but no one seemed to know. And I never thanked him even for saving my life. I don't think he wanted to be thanked.

"But I have never forgotten him. He was the sort of man you never could forget. I've never seen anyone in the least like him. He was somehow so much greater than all the other men I know. Am I a fool,

Froggy? I suppose I am. They say every woman will meet her mate if she waits long enough, but it can't be true. I suppose I might as well marry the Yankee heir, only I can't—I can't!"

The low voice ceased, and there fell a silence. Froggy's arms were folded very closely about the kneeling girl, but she had no words of comfort or counsel to offer. She was, in fact, out of her depth, though not for worlds would she have had Priscilla know it.

"You must just follow your own heart, dearest," she said at last. "And I think you will find happiness some day. God grant it!"

Priscilla lifted her head and kissed her. She knew quite well that she had led whither Froggy could not follow. But the knowledge did not hurt her.

She called Romeo, and went out into the summer sunshine, with a smile half tender and half humorous at the corners of her mouth. Poor Froggy!

III

THE PLENE IS THE GLEN

"I think we will go for a picnic, Romeo," said Priscilla.

It was a Saturday afternoon, warm and slumbrous, and Saturday was the day on which Rensselaer Abbey was open to the public when the family were away. Priscilla's presence was, as it were, unofficial, but though she was quite content to have it so, she was determined to escape from sight and hearing of the hot and dusty crowd that thronged the place on a fine day from three o'clock till six.

Half a mile or more from the Abbey, a brown stream ran gurgling through a miniature glen, to join the river below the park gates. This stream had been Priscilla's great delight for longer than she could remember. As children, she and her brother Mortimer had spent hours upon its mossy banks, and since those days she had dreamed many dreams, aye, and shed many tears,

within sound of its rushing waters. She loved the place. It was her haven of solitude. No one ever disturbed her there.

The walk across the park made them both hot, and it was a relief to sit down on her favourite tree-root above the stream and yield herself to the luxury of summer idleness. A robin was chirping far overhead, and from the grass at her feet there came the whirr of a grasshopper. Otherwise, save for the music of the stream, all was still. An exquisite, filmy drowsiness crept over her, and she slept.

A deep growl from her bodyguard roused her nearly an hour later, and she awoke with a start.

Romeo was sitting very upright, watching something on the farther side of the stream. He growled again as Priscilla sat up.

She looked across in the same direction, and laid a hasty hand upon his collar.

What she saw surprised her considerably. A man was lying face downwards on the brink of the stream, fishing about in the water, with one arm bared to the shoulder. He must have heard Romeo's warning growl, but he paid not the slightest attention to it. Priscilla watched him with keen interest. She could not see his face.

Suddenly he clutched at something in the clear water, and immediately straightened himself, withdrawing his arm. Then, quite calmly, he looked across at her, and spoke in a peculiar, soft drawl like a woman's.

"You'll forgive me for disturbing you, I know," he said, "when I tell you that all my worldly goods were at the bottom of this ditch."

He displayed his recovered property as if to verify his words—a brown leather pocket-book with a silver clasp. Priscilla gazed from it to its owner in startled silence. Her heart was beating almost to suffocation. She knew this man.

The water babbled on between them, singing a little tinkling song all its own. But the girl neither saw nor heard aught of her surroundings. She was back in the heat and whirl of a crowded New York thoroughfare

back in the fierce grip of this man's arms, hearing his quiet voice above her head, bidding her not to be frightened.

Gradually the vision passed. The wild tumult at her heart died down. She became aware that he was waiting for her to speak, and she did so as one in a dream.

"I am glad you got it back," she said.

His brown, clean-shaven face smiled at her, but there was no hint of recognition in his eyes. He had totally forgotten her, of course, as she had always told herself he would. Did not men always forget? And yet—and yet—was he not still her hero—the man for whose sake all other men were less than naught to her?

Again Romeo growled deeply, and she tightened her hold upon him. The stranger, however, appeared quite unmoved. He stood up and contemplated the stream that divided them with a measuring eye.

"Have I your permission to come across?" he asked her finally, in his soft Southern drawl.

She laughed a little nervously. He was not without audacity, notwithstanding his quiet manner.

"You can cross if you like," she said. "But it's all private property."

He paused, looking at her intently.

"It belongs to Earl Ramold, I have been told?"

She bent her head, and her answer leapt out with an ease that astonished her. She felt it to be an inspiration.

"It does. But the family are in town for the season. I am staying with the housekeeper. She is allowed to have her friends when the family are away."

It was rather breathlessly spoken, but he did not seem to notice.

"I see," he said. "Then one more or less can't make much difference."

With the words he took a single stride forward and bounded into the air. He landed lightly almost at her feet, and Romeo sprang up with an outraged snarl. It choked in his throat almost instantly, however, for the

stranger laid a restraining hand upon him, and spoke with soothing self-assurance.

"It's an evil brute that kills a friend, eh, old chap? You couldn't do it if you tried."

Romeo's countenance changed magically. He turned his hostility into an ardent welcome, and the girl at his side laughed again rather tremulously.

"It's a good thing you weren't afraid. I couldn't have held him."

"I saw that," said the Southerner, speaking softly, his face on a level with the great head he was caressing. "But I knew it would be all right. You see, I—kind of like dogs."

He turned to her after a moment, a faintly quizzical expression about his eyes.

"I won't intrude upon you," he said. "I can go and trespass elsewhere, you know."

Priscilla was not at all a rule-reckless. A long training in her stepmother's school had made her cautious and far-seeing in all things social. She knew exactly the risk that lay in unconventionality. But, then, had she not fled from town to lead a free life? Why should she submit to the old, galling chain here in this golden world where its restraint was not known? Her whole being rose up in revolt at the bare idea, and suddenly, passionately, she decided to break free. Even the flowers had their day of riotous, splendid life. She would have hers, wherever its enjoyment might lead her, whatever it might cost!

And so she answered him with a lack of reserve at which her London friends would have marvelled.

"You don't intrude at all. If you have come to see the Abbey, I should advise you to wait till after six o'clock."

"When it will be closed to the public?" he questioned, still looking quizzical.

She looked up at him, for the first time deliberately meeting his eyes. Yes, it was plain that he did not know her; but on the whole she was glad. It made things easier. She had been so foolish and hysterical upon that far-off day when he had saved her life.

"I will take you over it myself, if you care to accept my guidance," she said, "after the crowd have gone."

He glanced at his watch.

"And you are prepared to tolerate my society till six?" he said. "That is very generous of you."

She smiled, with a touch of wistfulness.

"Perhaps I don't find my own very inspiring."

He raised his eyebrows, but made no comment.

"Perhaps I had better tell you my name," he said, after a pause. "I am in a fashion connected with this place—a sort of friend of the family, if it isn't presumption to put it that way. My name is Julian Carfax, and Ralph Cochrane, the next of kin, is a pal of mine, a very great pal. He was coming over to England. Perhaps you heard. But he's a very shy chap, and almost at the last moment he decided not to face it at present. I was coming over, so I undertook to explain. I spoke to Lady Ratford in town over the telephone, and told her. She seemed to be rather affronted, for some reason. Possibly it was my fault. I'm not much of a diplomatist, anyway."

He seated himself on a mossy stone below her with this reflection, and began to cast pebbles into the brown water.

Priscilla watched him gravely. What he had told her interested her considerably, but she had no intention of giving herself away by betraying it.

There was a decided pause before she made up her mind how to pursue the subject.

"I had no idea that an American could be shy," she said then.

Carfax turned with his pleasant smile.

"No? We're a pushing race, I suppose. But I think Cochrane had some excuse for his timidity this time."

"Yes?" said Priscilla.

He began to laugh quietly.

"You see, it turned out that he was expected to marry the old maid of the family—Lady Priscilla. Naturally he kicked at that."

Priscilla bent sharply over Romeo, and began to

examine one of his huge paws. Her face was a vivid scarlet.

"It wasn't surprising, was it?" said Carfax, tossing another pebble into the stream. "It was more than enough, in my opinion, to make any fellow feel shy."

Priscilla did not answer. The colour was slow to fade from her face.

"I wonder if you have ever seen the lady?" Carfax pursued. "She was out of town when I was there."

"Yes; I have seen her."

Priscilla spoke with her head bent.

"You have? What is she like?"

He glanced round with an expression of amused interest. Priscilla looked up deliberately.

"She is quite old and ugly. But I don't think Mr. Ralph Cochran need be afraid. She doesn't like men. I am rather sorry for her myself."

"Sorry for her? Why?"

Carfax became serious.

"I think she is rather lonely," the girl said, in a low voice.

"You know her well?"

"Can anyone say that they really know anyone? No. But I think that she feels very deeply, and that her life has always been more or less of a failure. At least, that is the sort of feeling I have about her."

Again, but more gradually, the colour rose in her face. She took up her basket, and began to unpack it.

Carfax turned fully round.

"You go in for character-study," he said.

"A little," she owned. "I can't help it. Now let me give you some tea. I have enough for two."

"I shall be delighted," he said courteously. "Let me help you to unpack."

Priscilla could never recall afterwards how they spent the golden hours till six o'clock. She was as one in a dream, to which she clung closely, passionately, fearing to awake. For in her dream she was standing on the threshold of her paradise, waiting for the opening of the gates.

IV

ON THE THRESHOLD

Raffold Abbey was huge and rambling, girt with many memories. They spent nearly two hours wandering through the house and the old, crumbling chapel.

"There is a crypt below," Priscilla said, "but we can't go down without a lantern. Another day, if you cared——"

"Of course I should, above all things," declared Carfax. "I was just going to ask when I might come again."

Their intimacy had progressed wonderfully during those hours of companionship. The total absence of conventionality had destroyed all strangeness between them. They were as children on a holiday, enjoying the present to the full, and wholly careless of the future.

Not till Carfax had at length taken his leave did Priscilla ask herself what had brought him there. Merely to view his friend's inheritance seemed a paltry reason. Perhaps he was a journalist, or a writer of guide-books. But she soon dismissed the matter, to ask herself a more personal question. Was it possible that he knew her? Had he found out her name after the New York episode, and come at last to seek her? She could not honestly believe this, though her heart leapt at the thought. That affair had taken place four long years before. Of course, he had forgotten it. It could have made no more than a passing impression upon him. Had it been otherwise, would he not have claimed her at once as an old acquaintance?

Yes, it was plain that her first conviction must be correct. He did not know her. The whole incident had passed completely from his memory, crowded out, no doubt, and that speedily, by more absorbing interests. She had flashed across his life, attaining to no more importance than a bird upon the wing. He had saved her life at a frightful risk, and then forgotten her very

existence. She had always realised it must be so, but, strangely, she had never resented it. In spite of it, with a woman's queer, inexplicable faithfulness, she yet loved her hero, yet cherished closely, fondly, the memory that she doubted not had faded utterly from his mind.

She went to the village church with Froggy on the following day, though fully alive to the risk she ran of being pointed out to the ignorant as Lady Priscilla from the Abbey. She knew by some deep-hidden instinct that he would be there, and she was not disappointed. He came in late, and stood quite still just inside the little building, searching it up and down with keen, quiet eyes that never faltered in their progress till they lighted upon her. She fancied there was a faintly humorous expression about his mouth. His look did not dwell upon her. He stepped aside to a vacant chair close to the door, and Priscilla, in her great, square pew near the pulpit, saw him no more. When she left the church at the end of the service he had already disappeared.

Froggy went out to tea that afternoon with much solicitous regret, which Priscilla treated in a spirit of levity. She packed her tea-basket again as soon as she was alone, selecting her provisions with care. And soon after three, accompanied by Romeo, she started for the glen, not sauntering idly, but stepping briskly through the golden sunshine, as one with a purpose. She felt as if she were going to a trysting-place, though no word of a tryst had passed between them.

He was there before her, barcheaded and alert, quite obviously awaiting her. He did not express his pleasure in words as he took her hand in his. Only there was an indescribable look in his brown eyes that made her very glad that she had come. He had brought an enormous basket of strawberries, which he presented with that drawing ease of manner which she had come to regard as peculiarly his own, and they settled down to the afternoon's enjoyment in a harmony as complete as the summer peace about them.

No spoken confidences passed between them. Their

intimacy was such as to make words seem superfluous. Both seemed to feel that the present was all sufficing.

Only once did Priscilla challenge Carfax's memory. The impulse was irresistible at the moment, though she regretted it later. He was holding out to her the biggest strawberry he could find. It lay on a leaf on the palm of his hand, and as she took it she suddenly saw a long, terrible scar extending upwards from his wrist till his sleeve hid it from view.

"Why," she exclaimed, with a start; then, seeing his questioning look, "surely that's a burn?"

"It is," said Carfax.

He turned his hand over to hide it. His manner seemed to indicate that he did not wish to pursue the subject. But Priscilla, suddenly reckless, ignored the hint.

"But how did you do it?" she asked.

Carfax hesitated for a second, then—

"It was years ago," he said, rather unwillingly. "A lady's dress caught fire. It fell to me to put it out."

"How brave!" murmured Priscilla. Her eyes were shining. Had he looked up then he must have read her secret.

But he did not look up. For the first time he seemed to be labouring under some spell of embarrassment.

"It wasn't brave at all," he said, after a moment. "I could have done no less."

There was almost a vexed note in his voice. Yet she persisted.

"What was she like? Wasn't she very grateful?"

"I don't know at all. I don't suppose she enjoyed the situation any more than I did."

He plucked a tuft of moss and tossed it from him, as if therewith dismissing the subject. And Priscilla felt a little hurt, though not for worlds would she have suffered him to see it.

It fell to him to break the silence a few seconds later, and he did so without a hint of difficulty.

"When am I going to see the crypt?"

Priscilla laughed a little.

"Are you writing a book about the place?"

He laughed back at her quite openly.

"Not at present. When I do, it will be a romance, with you for heroine."

"Oh, no; not me!" she protested. "I am a mere nobody. Lady Priscilla ought to be your heroine."

He raised his eyebrows. She had begun to associate that look of his with protest rather than surprise.

"I have yet to be introduced to Lady Priscilla," he said. "And as she doesn't like men, I almost think I shall forgo the pleasure and keep out of her way."

"Perhaps I have given you a wrong impression about her," Priscilla said, speaking with a slight effort. "It is only the idle, foppish men about town she has no use for."

"She is fastidious, apparently," he returned, lying down abruptly at her feet.

"Don't you like women to be fastidious?" Priscilla demanded boldly.

He lay quite motionless for several seconds, then turned in a leisurely fashion upon his side to survey her.

"You are fastidious?" he asked.

"Of course I am!" Priscilla's words came rather breathlessly. "Don't you think me so?"

Again he was silent for seconds. Then, in a baffling drawl, his answer came:

"If you will allow me to say so, I think you are just the sweetest woman I ever met."

Priscilla met his eyes for a single instant, and looked away. She was burning and throbbing from head to foot. She could find naught to say in answer; no word wherewith to turn his deliberate sentence into a jest. Perhaps in her secret heart she did not desire to do so, for a voice within her, a voice long stifled, cried out that she had met her mate. And, since surrender was inevitable, why should she seek to delay it?

But Carfax said no more. Possibly he thought he had said too much. At least, after a long, quiet pause, he looked away from her; and the spell that bound her passed.

V

THE OPENING GATES

That evening Priscilla found a letter from her step-mother awaiting her—a lately worded, urgent summons.

"Your cousin has not arrived, after all," it said. "Your father and I are greatly disappointed. Would it not be as well for you to return to town? You can scarcely, I fear, afford to waste your time in this fashion. Young Lord Hatfield was asking for you most solicitously only yesterday. Such a charming man, I have always thought!"

"That—chicken!" said Priscilla, and tossed her letter aside.

Later, she went up to the top of the Abbey, and out on to a part of the roof that had been battlemented, to dream her dream again under the stars, and to view her paradise yet more closely from before the opening gates.

It was very late when she returned lightfooted to Froggy's sitting-room, and, kneeling by her friend's side, interposed her dark head between the kind, bulging eyes and the open Bible that lay upon the table.

"Froggy," she whispered softly, "I'm so happy, dear—so happy!"

And so kneeling, she told Froggy in short, halting sentences of the sudden splendour that had glorified her life.

Froggy was greatly astonished, and even startled. She was also anxious, and showed it. But Priscilla hastened to smoothe this away.

"Yes, I know it's sudden. But sometimes, you know, love is like that. Don't be anxious, Froggy. I am much more cautious—but what a ridiculous word!—than you think. He doesn't know who I am yet. I pretended to him that I was a relation of yours. And he isn't to know at present. You will keep that in mind, won't you? And in a day or two

I shall bring him in here to tea, and you will be able to judge of him for yourself. No, dear, no; of course he hasn't spoken. It is much too soon. You forget that though I have known him so long, he has only known me for two days. Oh, Froggy, isn't it wonderful to think of—that he should have come at last like this? It is almost as if—as if my love had drawn him."

VI

WITHIN HER PARADISE

Priscilla's reply to her stepmother's summons, written several days later, was a highly unsatisfactory epistle indeed, in the opinion of its recipient. She found it quite impossible to tear herself away from the country while the fine weather lasted, she wrote. She was enjoying herself immensely, and did not feel that she could ever endure the whole of a London season in one dose again.

It was not a well thought-out letter, being written in a haste that made itself obvious between the lines. Carfax had hired a motor-car, and was waiting for her. They went miles that day, and when they stopped at last they were in a country that she scarcely knew—a country of barren downs and great sunlit spaces, lonely, immense.

"This is the place," said Carfax quietly, as he helped her to alight.

Priscilla walked a few paces and stood still. She knew exactly why he had chosen it. Her heart was beating wildly. It seemed to dominate all her other faculties. She felt it to be almost more than she could bear.

Those moments of unacknowledged waiting were terrible to her. She knew she had taken an irrevocable step, and her free instinct clamoured loudly against it. It amounted almost to a panic within her.

There came a quiet step on the turf behind her. She did not turn, but the suspense became suddenly

unendurable. With a convulsive movement, she made as if she would go on. At the same instant an arm encircled her, checked her, held her closely.

"So, sweetheart!" said Julian Carfax, his voice soothing, womanly, but possessing within a note of vitality, of purpose, that she had never heard in it before.

She suffered his hold with a faint but desperate cry.

"You don't know me," she said, with a gasping effort. "You don't --" The words failed. He was pressing her to him ever more closely, and she felt his fingers gently fumbling at her veil. With a sudden passionate movement she put up both hands, and threw it back.

"There!" she said, with a scared, half laugh, half sob, and turned herself wholly to him.

The next instant, as his lips pressed hers, all the anguish of doubt that had come upon her was gone like an evil spirit from her soul. She knew only that they stood alone together in a vast space that was filled to the brim with the noonday sunshine. All her heart was flooded with rejoicing. The gates had opened wide for her, and she had entered in.

VII

BACK TO EARTH

Priscilla never quite realised afterwards how it was that the whole of that long summer day slipped by and her confession remained still unspoken. She did make one or two attempts to lead round to the subject, but each seemed to be foredoomed to failure, and at last she abandoned the idea—for that day, at least. It seemed, after all, but a paltry thing in face of her great happiness.

They sped homeward at length in the light of a cloudless sunset, smoothly and swiftly as if they swooped through air.

"I will take you to the edge of the park," Carfax

said ; and when they reached it he took her in his arms, holding her fast, as if he could not bear to let her go.

They parted at last almost in silence, but with the tacit understanding that they would meet in the glen on the following day.

Priscilla walked home through the lengthening shadows with a sense of wonderment and unreality at her heart. He had asked for no pledge, yet she knew that the bond between them was such as might stretch to the world's end and never break. They belonged to each other irrevocably now, whatever might intervene.

She reached the Abbey, walking as in a maze of happiness, with no thought for material things.

Kenneth came to greet her with effusion, and an air of having something to tell her. She fondled him, and went on with him into the house. They entered by a conservatory, and so through the shrouded drawing-room into the great hall.

The girl's eyes were dazzled by the sudden gloom she found there. She expected to meet no one, and so it was with a violent start that she saw a man's figure detach itself from the shadows and come towards her.

"Who is it?" she asked sharply; and then in astonishment: "Why, Dad!"

Her father's voice answered her, but not with the gruff kindness to which she was accustomed. It came to her grim and stern, and she knew instinctively that he hated the errand that had brought him.

"I have come down to fetch you," he said. "I do not approve of your being here alone. It is unusual and quite unnecessary. You are quite well?"

"Yes, I am well," Priscilla said. "But why should you object to my being here?"

She stood still, facing him. She knew who had inspired this interference, and from the bottom of her soul she resented it. Her father did not answer. Thinking it over calmly later, she knew that he was ashamed.

"Be ready to start from here in half an hour," he said. "We shall catch the nine-thirty."

Priscilla made no further protest. Her father had

never addressed that tone to her before, and it cut her to the heart.

"Very well," she said; and turned to go.

Her deep voice held no anger, and only Romeo, pressed close against her, knew that the hand that had just caressed him was clenched and quivering.

VIII

HER SIMPLE DUTY

Priscilla left a hastily scribbled note for Carfax in Froggy's keeping. In it she explained that she was obliged to go to town, but that she would meet him there any day before noon at any place that he would appoint. Froggy was to be the medium of his communication also.

She made no mention of Carfax to her father. He had hurt her far too deeply for any confidence to be possible. Moreover, it seemed to her that she had no right to speak until Carfax himself gave her leave.

She did not see her stepmother till the following day. The greeting between them was of the coolest, though Lady Raffold, being triumphant, sought to infuse a little sentiment into hers.

"I am really worn out, Priscilla," she said. "It is my turn now to have a little rest. I am going to leave all the hard work to you. It will be such a relief."

Three days later, however, she relinquished this attitude. Priscilla was summoned to her room, where she was breakfasting, and found her in great excitement.

"My dear child, he has arrived. He has actually arrived, and is staying at the Ritz. He must come and dine with us to-morrow night. It will be quite an informal affair—only thirty—so it can easily be managed. He must take you in, Priscilla; and, oh, my dear, do remember that it is the great opportunity of your life, and it mustn't be thrown away, whatever happens! Your father has set his heart upon it."

"Are you talking about Mr. Cochrane?" asked Priscilla.

"To be sure. Who else? Now don't put on that far-away look, pray! You know what is, after all, your simple duty, and I trust you mean to do it. You can't be going to disappoint your father in this matter. And you really must marry soon, Priscilla. It is getting serious. In fact, it worries me perpetually. By the way, here is a letter for you from Raffold. It must have got among mine by mistake. Mrs. Burrowes's handwriting, I imagine."

She was right. It was directed by Froggy, but Priscilla paled suddenly as she took it, realising that it contained an answer to her own urgent note.

Alone in her own room she opened it. The message was even briefer than hers had been: "Sweetheart,— At 11 a.m., on Thursday, under the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. I am thine, J. C."

Priscilla stood for long seconds with the note in her hand. It had reached her too late. The appointment had been for the day before. She turned to the envelope, and saw that it must have been lying among her step-mother's correspondence for two days. Doubtless he had waited for her at the trysting-place, and waited in vain.

Only one thing remained to be done, and that was to telegraph to Froggy for Carfax's address. But Froggy's answer, when it came, was only another disappointment:

"Address not known. Did you not receive letter I forwarded?"

Reluctantly Priscilla realised that there was nothing for it but patience. Carfax would almost certainly write again through Froggy.

That he had not her address she knew, for Froggy was under a solemn vow to reveal nothing, but she would not believe that he would regard her failure to keep tryst as a deliberate effort to snub him, though the fear that he might do so haunted and grew upon her all through the day.

She went to a theatre that night, and later to a dance, but neither entertainment served to lift the deadening weight from her spirits. She was miserable, and the

four hours she subsequently spent in bed brought her no relief.

She rose at last in sheer desperation, and went for an early ride in the Park. She met a few acquaintances, but she shook them off. She wanted to be alone.

When she was returning, however, her youthful admirer, Lord Harfield, attached himself to her, refusing to be discouraged.

"I met your cousin at the Club yesterday," he told her.

"What is he like?" Priscilla asked, without much interest.

"Oh, haven't you seen him yet? A very queer fish, with a twang you could cut with a knife. Don't think you'll like him," said Lord Harfield, who was jealous of every man who so much as bowed to Priscilla.

Priscilla smiled faintly.

"I don't think so, either," she said. "You are coming to dine with us, to-night, aren't you? He will be there, too."

"Will he? I say, what a bore for you! Yes, I'm coming. I'll do my best to help you," the boy assured her eagerly.

And again Priscilla smiled. She was quite sure that she would be bored, whatever happened, though she was too kind-hearted to say so.

IX

THE COMING OF HER HERO

"I wonder why Priscilla has put on that severely plain attire? It makes her look almost ugly," sighed Lady Ratford. "And how dreadfully pale she is to-night! Really, I have never seen her look more unattractive."

She turned with her most dazzling smile to receive the American Ambassador, and no one could have guessed that under her smile was real anger, because her stepdaughter was gracing the occasion in a robe of sombre black.

All the guests had arrived with the exception of Ralph Cochrane, the heir-apparent, as Priscilla styled him, and Lady Raffold chatted with one eye on the door. It was too bad of the young man to be late.

She was just giving him up in despair, and preparing to proceed to the dining-room without him, when his name was announced. Lord Raffold went forward to meet him. Priscilla, sitting on a lounge with Lord Harlehl's mother, caught the sound of a soft, leisurely voice apologetic; and something tightened suddenly at her heart, and held its beating. It was a voice she knew.

As through a mist, she looked across the great room, with its many lights, its buzz of careless voices. And suddenly, she seemed to her, she was back in the little village church at Raffold, furtively watching a stranger who stood in the entrance, and searched with level scrutiny quite deliberately and frankly till he found her.

Their eyes met, and her heart thrilled responsively as an instrument thrills to the hand of a skilled player.

Almost involuntarily she rose. There was some mistake. She knew there must be some mistake. She felt that in some fashion it rested with her to explain and to justify his presence there.

But in that instant his eyes left her, and the magnetism that compelled her died swiftly down. She saw him shake hands with Lady Raffold, and bow to the Ambassador.

Then came her stepmother's quick, beckoning glance, and she moved forward in response to it. She was quivering from head to foot, bewildered, in some subtle fashion afraid.

"My dear, your cousin. He will take you in. Ralph, this is Priscilla."

It was sublimely informal. Lady Raffold had rehearsed that introduction several times. It was half the battle that the young man should feel himself one of the family from the outset.

Priscilla grabbed at her self-control, and managed to bow. But the next instant his hand, strong, warm, reassuring, grasped hers.

burning and her eyes were wet, but she no longer cared about his seeing these details.

"What did you mean?" she demanded unexpectedly, "by saying to me that those fight hardest who fight in vain?"

He was not in the least disconcerted.

"I meant that though you might send me about my business you would not quite manage to shake me off altogether."

"Meaning that you would refuse to go?" she asked with a quiver that might have been anger in her voice.

"Meaning," he responded quietly, "that though you might deny me yourself, it might not be in your power to deny me the pleasure of serving you."

"And is it not in my power?" she asked swiftly.

He was looking at her very intently.

"No," he said in his most deliberate drawl. "I don't think it is."

"But it is," she asserted, meeting his look with blazing eyes. "You cannot possibly enter my service without my consent. And—and—I am not going to consent to that mad scheme of yours."

"No?" he said.

"No," she repeated with emphasis. "You yourself are the obstacle, as I said before. If—if you had not been in love with me, I might have considered it. But—now—it is out of the question. Moreover," her eyes shot suddenly downwards, as though to hide their fire, "I shall not want that sort of protector now."

"No?" he said again, very softly this time. He was standing straight before her, still closely watching her with that in his eyes that he had never permitted there before.

"No!" she repeated once more, and again brokenly she laughed; then suddenly raised her eyes to his, and gave him both her hands impetuously, confidently, yet with a certain shyness notwithstanding. "I—I am going to marry again after all," she said, "if—if you will have me."

"My dear," said Lord Ronald very tenderly, "I always meant to!"

that moment. The magic of her went to the man's head like wine. Till that instant he had to a great extent controlled himself, but that was the turning-point. She dazzled him, she intoxicated him, she maddened him.

The savagery in him flared into a red blaze of passion. Without another word he caught her suddenly to him, and before she could begin to realise his intention he had kissed her fiercely upon her lips.

IX

The moments that followed were like a ghastly nightmare to Beryl, for, struggle as she might, she knew herself to be helpless. Having once passed the bounds of civilisation, he gave full rein to his savagery. And again and yet again, holding her crushed to him, he kissed her shrinking face. He was as a man possessed, and once he laughed—a devilish laugh—at the weakness of her resistance.

And then quite suddenly she felt his grip relax. He let her go abruptly, so that she tottered and almost fell, only saving herself by one of the pillars of the arbour.

A great surging was in her brain, a surging that nearly deafened her. She was too spent, too near to swooning, to realise what it was that had wrought her deliverance. She could only cling gasping and quivering to her support while the tumult within her gradually subsided.

It was several seconds later that she began to be aware of something happening, of some commotion very near to her, of trampling to and fro, and now and again of a voice that cursed. These things quickly goaded her to a fuller consciousness. Exhausted though she was, she managed to collect her senses and look down upon the spectacle below her.

There, on the edge of the fountain, two figures swayed and fought. One of them she saw at a glance was Fletcher. She had a glimpse of his face in the uncanny

"Curious, isn't it?" the quiet voice asked. "We can't be strangers, you and I."

The grip of his fingers was close and intimate. It was as if he appealed for her support.

With an effort she forced herself to respond:

"Of course not. It must be quite five years since our first meeting."

He looked at her oddly, quizzically, as he offered his arm.

"Why, yes," he drawled, as they began to move towards the door. "Should our acquaintance be forgot? It is exactly five years ago to-day."

X

THE STORY OF A FRAUD

"Funny, wasn't it, sweetheart?"

The soft voice reached her through a buzz of other louder voices. Priscilla moved slightly, but she did not turn her head.

"You will have to explain," she said. "I don't understand anything yet."

"Nor I," came the quiet retort. "It's the woman's privilege to explain first, isn't it?"

Against her will, the blood rose in her face. She threw him a quick glance.

"I can't possibly explain anything here," she said.

He met her look with steady eyes.

"Let me tell you the story of a fraud," he said; and proceeded without further preliminary. "There was once a man—a second son, without prospects and without fame—who had the good fortune to do a service to a woman. He went away immediately afterwards lest he should make a fool of himself, for she was miles above his head, anyway. But he never forgot her. The mischief was done, so far as he was concerned."

He broke off, and raised his champagne to his lips as if he drank to a memory.

Priscilla was listening, but her eyes were downcast.

She wore the old, absent look that her stepmother always deprecated. The soft drawl at her side continued, every syllable distinct and measured.

"Years passed, and things changed. The man had belonged to a cadet branch of an aristocratic British family. But one heir after another died, till only he was left to inherit. The woman belonged to the older branch of the family, but, being a woman, she was passed over. A time came when he was invited by the head of the house to go and see his inheritance. He would have gone at once and gladly, but for a hint at the end of the letter to the effect that, if he would do his part, what the French shamelessly call a *mariage de convenance* might be arranged between his cousin and himself—an arrangement advantageous to them both from a certain point of view. He didn't set up for a paragon of morality. Perhaps even, had things been a little different, he might have been willing. As it was, he didn't like the notion, and he jibbed." He paused. "But for all that," he said, his voice yet quieter and more deliberate, "he wanted the woman, if he could make her care for him. That was his difficulty. He had a feeling all along that the thing must be an even greater offence to her than it was to him. He worried it all through, and at last he worked out a scheme for them both. He called himself by an old school *alias*, and came to her as a stranger—

"You're not eating anything, sweetheart. Wouldn't it be as well, just for decency's sake? There's a comic ending to this story, so you mustn't be sad. Who's that boy scowling at me on the other side of the table? What's the matter with the child?"

"Never mind," murmured Priscilla hastily. "He doesn't mean anything. Please go on."

He began to laugh at her with gentle ridicule.

"Impatient for the third act? Well, the scheme worked all right. But it so chanced that the woman decided to be subtle, too. She knew him for an old friend the instant she saw him. But he pretended to have forgotten that old affair in New York. He didn't want her to feel in any way under an obligation. So he

played the humble stranger, and she—sweetheart—she played the simple, country maiden, and she did it to perfection. I think, you know, that she was a little afraid her name and title would frighten him away."

"And so he humoured her?" said Priscilla, a slight quiver in her deep voice.

"They humoured each other, sweetheart. That was where it began to be funny. Now I am going to get you to tell me the rest of the story."

She turned towards him again, her face very pale.

"Yes; it's very funny, no doubt—funny for the man, I mean; for the woman, I am not so sure. How does she know that he really cared for her from the beginning; that he was always quite honest in his motive? How can she possibly know this?"

Again for a moment their eyes met. There was no hint of dismay in the man's brown face.

"She does know it, sweetheart," he answered, with confidence. "I can't tell you how. Probably she couldn't, either. He was going to explain everything, you know, under the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral. But for some reason it didn't come out. He spent three solid hours waiting for her, but she didn't come. She had found him out, perhaps? And was angry?"

"Perhaps," said Priscilla, her voice very low.

Again he raised his glass to his lips.

"We will have the end of the story presently," he said; and deliberately turned to his left-hand neighbour.

XI

THE END OF THE STORY

A musical *soirée* was to follow that interminable dinner, and for a time Priscilla was occupied in helping Lady Raffold to receive the after-dinner guests. She longed to escape before the contingent from the dining-room arrived upstairs, but she soon realised the impossibility of this. Her stepmother seemed to want her

at every turn, and when at length she found herself free, young Lord Hatfield appeared at her elbow.

"It was intolerable," she turned upon him without pity.

"Oh, please," she said, "I've dropped my fan in the dining-room or on the stairs. Would you be so kind—"

He departed, not suspecting her of treachery; and she slipped forthwith into a tiny conservatory behind the piano. It was her only refuge. She could but hope that no one had seen her retire thither. Her need for solitude just then was intense. She felt herself physically incapable of facing the crowd in the music-room any longer. The first crashing chords of the piano covered her retreat. She shut herself softly in, and sank into the only chair the little place contained.

Her mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions. Anger, disappointment, and an almost insane exultation fought together for the mastery. She longed to be rational, to think the matter out quietly and impartially, and decide how to treat it. But her most determined efforts were vain. The music disturbed her. She felt as if the chords were hammering upon her brain. Yet when it suddenly ceased, the unexpected silence was almost harder to bear.

In the buzz of applause that ensued, the door behind her opened, and a man entered.

She heard the click of the key in the lock, and turned sharply to protest. But the words died on her lips, for there was that in his brown, resolute face that silenced her. She became suddenly breathless and quivering before him, as she had been that day on the down when he had taken her into his arms.

He withdrew the key, and dropped it into her lap.

"Open it you will," he said, in the quiet voice, half tender, half humorous, that she had come to know so well. "I am closely followed by the infant with the scowl."

Prithvi sat silent in her chair. What could she say to him?

"Well?" he said, after a moment. "The end of the story—is it written yet?"

She shook her head dumbly. Curiously, the throbbing anger had left her heart at the mere sound of his voice.

He waited for about three seconds, then knelt quietly down beside her.

"Say," he drawled, "I kind of like Radford Abbey, sweetheart. Wouldn't it be nice to spend our honeymoon there? Do you think they would let us?" He laid his hand upon both of hers. "Wouldn't it be good?" he said softly. "I should think there would be room for two, eh, sweetheart?"

With an effort she sought to withstand him before he wholly dominated her.

"And every one will call it a *mariage de convenance*!"

"Let them!" he answered, with suppressed indifference. "I reckon we shall have the laugh. But it isn't so unusual, you know. Americans always fall in love at first sight."

He was unanswerable. He was sublime. She marvelled that she could have ever even attempted to resist him.

With a sudden, tremulous laugh, she caught his hand to her, holding it fast.

"Not Americans only!" she said. And swiftly, passionately, she bent and pressed her lips to the red, scared scar upon her hero's wrist.

THE EXAMPLE

"AND the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues; and they repented not to give Him glory."

The droning voice quivered and fell silent. Within the hospital tent, only the buzz of flies innumerable was audible. Without, there sounded near at hand the squeak of a sentry's boots, and in the distance the clatter of the camp.

The man who lay dying was in a remote and quite detached sense aware of these things, but his fevered imagination had carried him beyond. He watched, as it were, the glowing pictures that came and went in his furnace of pain. These little details were to him but the distant humming of the spinning-wheel of time from which he was drawing ever farther and farther away. They did not touch that inner consciousness with which he saw his visions.

Now and then he turned his head sharply on the pillow, as an alien might turn at the sound of a familiar voice, but always, after listening intently, it came back to its old position, and the man's restless eyes returned to the crack high up in the tent canvas through which the sun shone upon him like a piercing eye.

The occupant of the bed next to him watched him furtively, fascinated but uneasy. He was a young soldier of the simple country type, and the wild words that came now and again from the fevered lips startled him uncomfortably. He wished the dying man would

cease his mutterings and let him asleep. But every time the prolonged silence seemed to indicate a final cessation of the nuisance, the droning voice took up the tale once more.

"And men were scorched with great heat—and they repented not—repented not."

A soft-stopping native orderly moved to the bedside and paused. Instantly the wandering words were hushed.

"Bring me some water, Sammy," the same voice said huskily. "If you can't take the sun out of the sky, you can give me a drink."

The native shook his head.

"The doctor will come soon," he said soothingly. "Have patience."

Patience! The word had no meaning for him in that inferno of suffering. He moved his head, that searching spot of sunlight dancing in his eyes, and cursed deep in his throat the man who kept him waiting.

Barely a minute later the doctor came—a quiet, bronzed man, level-eyed and strong. He bent over the stricken figure on the bed, and drew the tumbled covering up a little higher. He had just written "mortally wounded" of this man on his hospital report, but there was nothing in his manner to indicate that he had no hope for him.

"Get another pillow," he said to the native orderly. And to the dying man: "That will take the sun out of your eyes. I see it is bothering you."

"Curse the sun!" the parched lips gasped. "Can't you give me a drink?"

The eyes of the young soldier in the next bed scanned the doctor's face anxiously. He, too, wanted a drink. He thirsted from the depths of his soul. But he knew there was no water to be had. The supply had been cut off hours before.

"No," the doctor said gravely. "I can't give it you yet. By and by, perhaps—"

"By and by!" There was a dreadful sound like laughter in the husky voice.

The doctor laid a restraining hand on the man's chest.

"Hush!" he said, in a lower tone. "It's this sort of thing that shows what a fellow is made of. All these other poor chaps are children. But you, Ford, you are grown up, so to speak. I look to you to help me—to set the example."

"Example!—Man alive!" A queer light danced like a mocking spirit in Private Ford's eyes, and again he laughed—an exceeding bitter laugh. "I've been made an example of all my life," he said. "I've sometimes thought it was what I was created for. Ah, thanks!" he added in a different tone, as the doctor raised him on the extra pillow. "You're a brick, sir! Sit down a minute, will you? I want to talk to you."

The doctor complied, his hand on the wounded man's wrist.

"That's better," Ford said. "Keep it there. And stop me if I rave. It's a queer little world, isn't it? I remember you well, but you wouldn't know me. You were one of the highlanders, and I was always more or less of an earthworm. But you'll remember Rotherby, the captain of the first eleven? A fine chap that. He's dead now, eh?"

"Yes," the doctor said, "Rotherby's dead."

He was looking with an intent scrutiny at the scarred and bandaged face on the pillow. He had felt from the first that this man was no ordinary ranker. Yet till that moment it had never occurred to him that they might have met before.

"I always liked Rotherby," the husky voice went on. "He was a big swell, and he didn't think much of small fry. But you—you and he were friends, weren't you?"

"For a time," the doctor said. "It didn't last."

There was regret in his voice—the keen regret of a man who has lost a thing he valued.

"No; it didn't last," Ford agreed. "I remember when you chucked him. Or was it the other way round? I saw a good deal of him in those days. I thought him a jolly good fellow, till I found out what a scoundrel he was. And I had a soft feeling for him even then. You knew he was a scoundrel, didn't you?"

"Yes, I knew."

The doctor spoke reluctantly. The hospital tent the silent row of wounded men, the stifling atmosphere the flies, all were gone from his inner vision. He was looking with grave, compassionate eyes at the picture that absorbed the man at his side.

"He was good company, eh?" the restless voice went on. "But he had his black moments. I didn't know him so well in the days when you and he were friends."

"Nor I," the doctor said. "But—why do you want to talk of him?"

Again he was searching the face at his side with grave intensity. It did not seem to him that this man could ever have been of the sort that his friend Rotherby would have cared to admit to terms of intimacy. Rotherby—notwithstanding his airs—had been fastidious in many ways.

The answer seemed to make the matter more comprehensible.

"I was with him when he died," the man said. "It was in just such an inferno as this. We were alone together, looking for gold in the Australian desert. We didn't find it, though it was there, mountains of it. The water gave out. We tossed for the last drink—and I won. That was how Rotherby came to die. He hadn't much to live for, and he was going to die, anyhow. A queer chap, he was. He and his wife never lived together after the smash came, and he had to leave the country. Perhaps you know?"

"Yes," the doctor said again, "I knew."
Ford moved his head restlessly.

"The thought of her used to worry him in the night," he said. "I've known him lie for hours, not sleeping, just staring up at the stars, and thinking, thinking. I've sometimes thought that the worst torture on earth can't equal that. You know, after he was dead, they found her miniature on him—a thing in a gold case, with their names engraved inside. He used to wear it round his neck like a charm. It was by that they identified him—that and his signet-ring, and one or two

letters. Scamp though I was, I had the grace not to rob the dead. They sent the things to his wife. I've often wondered what she did with them."

"I can tell you that," said the doctor quietly. "She keeps them among her greatest treasures."

Ford turned sharply on his pillows, and stifled an exclamation of pain.

"You know her still, then?" he said.

"She is my wife," the doctor answered.

A long silence followed his words. The wounded soldier lay with closed eyes and drawn brows. He seemed to be unconscious of everything save physical pain.

Suddenly he seemed to recover himself, and looked up.

"You," he said slowly, "you are Montagu Durant, the fellow she was engaged to before she married Rotherby."

The doctor bent his head.

"Yes," he said. "I am Montagu Durant."

"Rotherby's friend," Ford went on. "The chap who stuck to him through thick and thin—to be betrayed in the end. I know all about you, you see, though you haven't placed me yet."

"No, I can't place you," Durant said. "I don't think we ever knew each other very well. You will have to tell me who you are."

"Later—later," said Ford. "No, you never knew me very well. It was always you and Rotherby, you and Rotherby. You never looked at any one else, till that row at the 'Varsity when he got kicked out. Yes," with a sudden, sharp sigh, "I was a 'Varsity man too. I admired Leonard Rotherby in those days. Poor old Leo! He knew how to hit a boundary as well as any fellow! You never forgave him, I suppose, for marrying your girl?"

There was a pause, and the fevered eyes sought Durant's face. The answer came at length very slowly.

"I could have forgiven him," Durant said, "if he had stuck to her and made her happy."

"Ah! There came the rub. But did Rotherby ever stick to anything? It was a jolly good thing he died—

THE EXAMPLE

for all concerned. Yet, you know, he cared for her to the last. Blackguard as he was, he carried her in his heart right up to his death. I tell you I was with him, and I know."

There was strong insistence in the man's words. Durant could feel the racing pulse leap and quiver under his hand. He leaned forward a little, looking closely into the drawn face.

"I think you have talked enough," he said. "Try to get some rest."

"I haven't raved," said Ford, with confidence. "It has done me good to talk. I can't help thinking of Leo Rotherby. My brain runs on him. He wanted to see you—horribly—before he died. I believe he'd have asked your forgiveness. But you wouldn't have given it to him, I suppose? You will never forgive him in your heart?"

Again the answer did not come at once. Durant was frowning a little—the frown of a man who tries to fathom his own secret impulses.

"I think," he said at last, "that if I had seen him and he had asked for it, I should not have refused my forgiveness."

"No one ever refused Rotherby anything," said the dying man, with a curious, half-humorous twist of his mouth under its dark moustache.

"Except yourself," Durant reminded him, almost involuntarily.

Again the wandering, uneasy eyes sought his. "You mean—that drain of water," Ford said with a total lack of shame or remorse. "Yes, it's true Rotherby didn't have that. But it didn't make any difference, you know. He was going to die. And the living come before the dead, eh, doctor?"

Durant did not quite understand his tone, but he suffered the words to go unchallenged. He was not there to discuss the higher morality with a dying man. Moreover, he knew that the bare mention of water was a fiery torture to him, disguise it as he might.

He sat a little longer, then rose to go. He fancied that there was a shade less of restlessness about this

man, whom he knew to be suffering what no other man in the tent could have endured in silence.

In response to a sign he stopped to catch a few, low-spoken words.

"By and by," said Private Ford, with husky self-assurance, "when it's dark—or only moonlight—a man will creep out between the lines and crawl down to the river, to get some water for—the children."

He was wondering again, Durant saw; and his pity mounted high.

"Perhaps, poor fellow; perhaps," he answered gently.

As he went away he heard again the droning, unconscious voice.

"And power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched—with great heat. Eh, Sammy? Is that water you have there? Quick! Give me—what? There is none? Then why the—why the—" There came an abrupt pause; then a brief, dry chuckle that was like the crackling of flame through dead twigs. "Ah, I forgot. I mustn't curse. I've got to set the example to these children. But, O God, the heat and the flies!"

Durant wondered it after all it had been a kindness to call back the passing spirit that had begun to forget.

Slowly the scorching day wore away, till evening descended in a blaze of gorgeous colouring upon the desolate African wilderness and the band of men that had been surrounded and cut off by a wily enemy.

They were expecting relief. Hourly they expected it, but, being hampered by a score of wounded, it was not possible for them to break through the thickly populated scrub unassisted. And they had no water.

A stream flowed, brown and sluggish, not more than a hundred yards below the camp. But that same stream was flanked on the farther side by a long, black line of thicket that poured forth fire upon any man who ventured out from behind the great rocks that protected the camp.

It had been attempted again and again, for the needs of the wounded were desperate. But each effort

had been disastrous, and at last an order had gone forth that no man was to expose himself again to this deadly risk.

So, silent behind their entrenchments, with the hospital tent in their midst, the British force had to endure the situation, waiting with a dogged patience for the coming of their comrades who could not be far away.

Regal to the last, the sun sank away in orange and gold; and night, burning, majestic, shimmering, spread over a cloudless sky. A full moon floated up behind dense forest trees, and shed a glimmering radiance everywhere. The heat did not seem to vary by a breath.

A great restlessness spread like a wave through the hospital tent. Men waked from troubled slumber, crying aloud like children, piteously, unreasoningly, for water.

The doctor went from one to another, restraining, soothing, reassuring. His influence made itself felt, and quiet returned; but it was a quiet that held no peace; it was the silent gripping of an agony that was bound to overcome.

Again and again through the crawling hours the bitter protest broke out afresh, like the crying of souls in torment. One or two became delirious, and had to be forcibly restrained from struggling forth in search of that which alone could still their torture.

Durant was too fully occupied with these raving patients of his to spare any attention for the bed in the far corner on which they had laid the one man whose injuries were mortal. If he thought of the man at all it was to reflect that he was probably dead.

But at last a young officer entered the seething tent and touched him on the shoulder.

"Can you come outside a moment? You're wanted," he said.

Durant turned from a man who was lying exhausted and barely conscious, took up his case, and followed him out. He did just glance at the bed in the corner as he went, but he saw no movement there.

His summoner turned upon him abruptly as they emerged.

"Look here," he said. "There's a water-bag quite full, waiting for those poor beggars in there. Better send one of the orderlies for it."

"Water!" said Durant sharply, as if the news were difficult to believe. Then, recovering himself: "Tell the sentry, will you? I can't spare an orderly."

The young officer complied, and hurried him on.

"The poor chap is breathing his last," he said. "You can't do him any good, but he wants you."

"Who is it?" asked the doctor.

"The man who fetched the water—Ford. He was badly wounded when he started. He crawled every inch of the way on his stomach, and back again, dragging the bag with him. Heaven knows how he did it! It's taken him hours."

"Ford?" the doctor said incredulously. "Ford? Impossible! How did he get away?"

"Oh, he crawled through somehow; Heaven only knows how! But he's done now, poor beggar—pegging out fast. We got him into shelter, but we couldn't do more, he was in such agony."

The speaker stopped, for Durant had broken into a run. The moonlight showed him a group of men gathered about a prone figure. They separated and stood aside as he reached them; and he, kneeling, found in the prone figure the man who had talked with him in the afternoon of the friend who had played him false.

He was very far gone, lying in a dreadful twisted heap, his head, with its bloodstained bandages, resting on his arm. Yet Durant saw that he still lived, and he tried with gentle hands to ease the strain of his position.

With a sharp gasp, Ford opened his eyes.

"Hullo!" he said. "It's you, is it? Did they get the water?"

"They have got it by now," the doctor answered.

"Ah!" The man's lips twisted in a difficult smile. He struggled bravely to keep the mortal agony out of

his face. "Gave you the slip that time," he gasped. "Disobeyed orders, too. But it didn't matter—except for example. You must tell them, eh? Dying men have privileges."

"Tell him he'd have had the V.C. for it," whispered the officer in command, over the doctor's shoulder.

Durant complied, and caught the quick gleam that shot up in the dying eyes at his words.

"The gods were always behind time—with me," came the husky whisper. "I used to think I'd scale Olympus, but—they kicked me down. If—if there's any water to spare, when it's gone round, I—I——"

He broke off with a rending cough. Some one put a tin cup into the doctor's hand, and he held it to the parched lips. Ford drank in great gulps, and, as he drank, the worst agony passed. His limbs relaxed after the draught, and he lay quite still, his face to the sky.

After the passage of minutes he spoke again suddenly. His voice was no longer husky, but clear and strong. His eyes were the eyes of a man who sees a vision.

"Jove!" he said. "What a princely gathering to see me carry out my bat! Don't grin, you fellows. I know it was a fluke—a dashed fine fluke, too. But it's what I always meant, after all. There's good old Monty, yelling himself hoarse in the pavilion. And his girl—waving. Sweet girl, too—the best in the world. I might cut him out there. But I won't, I won't! I'm not such a hound as that, though she's the only woman in the world, bless her, bless her!"

He stopped. Durant was bending over him, listening eagerly, as one might listen to the voice of an old, familiar friend, heard again after many years.

He did not speak. He seemed afraid to dispel the other's dream. But after a moment, the man in his arms made a sudden, impulsive movement towards him. It was almost like a gesture of affection. And their eyes met.

There followed a brief silence that had in it something of strain. Then Ford uttered a shaky laugh. The vision had passed.

"So—you see—he had to die—anyhow," he said.

'My love to your wife, dear old Monty! Tell her—
(I'm—actually pleased——!)"

His voice ceased, yet for a moment his lips still
seemed to form words.

Purand stooped lower over him, and spoke at last
with a sort of urgent tenderness.

"Leo!" he said. "Leo, old chap!"

But there came no answer save a faint, still smile.
The man he called had passed beyond his reach.

* * * * *

Relief came to the beleaguered force at daybreak,
and the worst incident of the campaign ended without
disaster. A casualty list, published in the London
papers a few days later, contained an announcement,
which concerned nobody who read it, to the effect that
Private Purand, of a West African Regiment, had suc-
cumbed to his wounds.

THE FRIEND WHO STOOD BY

"AND you will come back, Jim? Promise! Promise!"

"Of course, darling—of course! There! Don't cry! Can't you see it's a chance in a thousand? I've never had such a chance before."

The sound of a woman's low sobbing was audible in the silence that followed; and a man who was leaning on the sea-wall above, started and peered downwards.

He could dimly discern two figures standing in the shadow of a great breakwater below him. More than that he could not distinguish, for it was a dark night; but he knew that the man's arms were about the girl, and that her face was hidden against him.

Realising himself to be an intruder, he stood up and began to walk away.

He had not gone a dozen yards before the sound of flying feet caught his attention, and he turned his head. A woman's light figure was running behind him along the deserted parade. He waited for her under a gas-lamp.

She overtook him and fled past him without a pause. He caught a glimpse of a pale face and fair hair in wild disorder.

Then she was gone again into the night, running swiftly. The darkness closed about her, and hid her from view.

The man on the parade paused for several seconds, then walked back to his original resting place by the sea-wall.

The band on the pier was playing a jaunty selection from a comic opera. It came in gusts of gaiety. The

wash of the sea, as it crept up the beach, was very mysterious and remote.

Below, on the piled shingle, a man stood alone, staring out over the darkness, motionless and absorbed.

The watcher above him struck a match at length and kindled a cigarette. His face was lit up during the operation. It was the face of a man who had seen a good deal of the world and had not found the experience particularly refreshing. Yet, as he looked down upon the silent figure below him, there was more of compassion than cynicism in his eyes. There was a glint of humour also, like the shrewd, half-melancholy humour of a monkey that possesses the wisdom of all the ages, and can impart none of it.

Suddenly there was a movement in the shingle. The lonely figure had turned and flung itself face downwards among the tumbling stones. The abandonment of the action was very young, and perhaps it was that very fact that made it so indescribably pathetic. To Lester Cheveril, leaning on the sea wall, it appealed as strongly as the crying of a child. He glanced over his shoulder. The place was deserted. Then he deliberately dropped his cigarette-case over the wall and exclaimed: "Confound it!"

The prone figure on the shingle rolled over and sat up.

"Hullo!" said Cheveril.

There was a distinct pause before a voice replied:

"Hullo! What's the matter?"

"I've dropped my cigarette-case," said Cheveril.

"Heavily careless of me!"

Again there was a pause. Then the man below him stumbled to his feet.

"I've got a match," he said. "I'll see if I can find it."

"Don't trouble," said Cheveril politely. "The steps are close by."

He walked away at an easy pace and descended to the beach. The flicker of a match guided him to the searcher. As he drew near, the light went out, and the young man turned to meet him.

"Here it is," he said gruffly.

"Many thanks!" said Cheveril. "It's so confoundedly dark to-night. I scarcely expected to see it again."

The other muttered an acknowledgment, and stood prepared to depart.

Cheveril, however, paused in a conversational attitude. He had not risked his property for nothing.

"A pretty little place, this," he said. "I suppose you are a visitor here like myself?"

"I'm leaving to-morrow," was the somewhat grudging rejoinder.

"I only came this afternoon," said Cheveril. "Is there anything to see here?"

"There's the sea and the lighthouse," his companion told him curtly—"nothing else."

Cheveril smiled faintly to himself in the darkness.

"Try one of these cigarettes," he said sociably. "I don't enjoy smoking alone."

He was aware, as his unknown friend accepted the offer, that he would have infinitely preferred to refuse.

"Been here long?" he asked him, as they plunged through the shingle towards the sand.

"I've lived here nearly all my life," was the reply. And, after a moment, as if the confidence would not be repressed: "I'm leaving now—for good."

"Ah!" said Cheveril sympathetically. "It's pretty beastly when you come to turn out. I've done it, and I know."

"It's infernal," said the other gloomily, and relapsed into silence.

"Going abroad?" Cheveril ventured presently.

"Yes. Going to the other side of the world." Surliness had given place to depression in the boy's voice. Sympathy, albeit from an unknown quarter, moved him to confidence. "But it isn't that I mind," he said, a moment later. "I should be ready enough to clear out if it weren't for—some one else!"

"A woman, I suppose?" Cheveril said.

He was aware that his companion glanced at him

harply through the gloom, and knew that he was momentarily suspected of eavesdropping.

Then, with imperious candour, the answer came :

"Yes ; the girl I'm engaged to. She has got to stay behind and marry some one else."

Cheveril's teeth closed silently upon his lower lip. This, also, was one of the things he knew.

"You can't trust her, then ?" he said, after a pause.

"Oh, she cares for me—of course!" the boy answered.

"But there isn't a chance for us. They are all dead against me, and the other fellow will be on the spot. He hasn't asked her yet, but he means to. And her people will simply force her to accept him when he does. Of course they will! He is Cheveril, the millionaire. You must have heard of him. Every one has."

"I know him well," said Cheveril.

"So do I," by right," the boy plunged on recklessly—"an undersized little animal with a squint."

"I didn't know he squinted," Cheveril remarked into the darkness. "But, anyhow, they can't make her marry against her will."

"Can't they?" returned the other fiercely. "I don't know what you call it, then. They can make her life so positively unbearable that she will have to give in, if it is only to get away from them. It's perfectly foolish ; but they will do it. I know they will do it. She hasn't a single friend to stand by her."

"Except you," said Cheveril.

They had nearly reached the water. The rush and splash of the waves held something solemn in their harmonies, like the chords of a splendid symphony. Cheveril heard the quick, indignant voice at his side like a cry of unrest breaking through.

"What can I do?" it said. "I have never had a chance till now. I have just had a berth in India offered to me ; but I can't possibly hope to support a wife for two years at least. And meanwhile—meanwhile—"

It stopped there ; and a long wave broke with a roar, and rushed up in gleaming foam almost to their

feet. The younger man stepped back; but Cheveril remained motionless, his face to the swirling water.

Quite suddenly at length he turned, as a man whose mind is made up, and began to walk back to the dimly lighted parade. He marched straight up the shingle, as if with a definite purpose in view, and mounted the rickety iron ladder to the pavement.

His companion followed, too absorbed by his trouble to feel any curiosity regarding the stranger to whom he had poured it out.

Under a flaring gas-lamp, Cheveril stood still.

"Do you mind telling me your name?" he said abruptly.

That roused the boy slightly. "My name is Willowby," he answered—"James Willowby."

He looked at Cheveril with a dawning wonder, and the latter uttered a short, grim laugh. The light streamed full upon his face.

"You know me well, don't you," he said, "by sight?"

Young Willowby gave a great start and turned crimson. He offered neither apology nor excuse.

"I like you for that," Cheveril said, after a moment. "Can you bring yourself to shake hands?"

There was unmistakable friendliness in his tone, and Willowby responded to it promptly. He was a sportsman at heart, however he might rail at circumstance.

As their hands met, he looked up with a queer mirthless smile.

"I hope you are going to be good to her," he said.

"I am going to be good to you both," said Lester Cheveril quietly.

In the silence that followed his words, the band on the pier became audible on a sudden gust of wind. It was gaily jigging out the tune of "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

* * * *

"What a secluded corner, Miss Harford! May I join you?"

Evelyn Harford looked up with a start of dismay. He was the last person in the world with whom she desired a *rendezvous*; but he was dining at her father's house, and she could not well refuse. Reluctantly she laid aside the paper on her knee.

"I thought you were playing bridge," she said, in a chilly tone.

"I tried to," said Cheveril.

He stood looking down at her with shrewd, kindly eyes. But the girl was too intent upon making her escape to notice his expression.

"Won't you go to the billiard-room?" she said. "They are playing pool."

He shook his head.

"I came here expressly to talk to you," he said.

"Oh!" said Evelyn.

She turned back in her chair, and tried to appear at her ease; but her heart was thumping tumultuously. The man was going to propose, she knew—she knew; and she was not ready for him. She felt that she would break down unconsciously if he pressed his suit just then.

Cheveril, however, seemed in no hurry. He sat down facing her, and there followed a pause, during which she felt that he was studying her attentively.

Growing desperate at length, she looked him in the face, and spoke.

"I am not a very lively companion to-night, Mr. Cheveril," she said. "That is why I came away from the rest."

There was more of appeal in her voice than she intended; and, realising it, she coloured deeply, and looked away again. He was just the sort of man to avail himself of a moment's weakness, she told herself, with rising agitation. Those shrewd eyes of his missed nothing.

But Cheveril gave no sign of having observed her distress. He maintained his silence for some seconds longer. Then, somewhat abruptly, he broke it.

"I didn't follow you in order to be amused, Miss Harford," he said. "The fact is, I have a confession

to make to you, and a favour to ask. And I want you to be good enough to hear me out before you try to answer. May I count on this?"

The dry query did more to quiet her perturbation than any solicitude. She was quite convinced that he meant to propose to her, but his absence of ardour was an immense relief. If he would only be business-like and not sentimental, she felt that she could bear it.

"Yes, I will listen," she said, facing him with more self-possession than she had been able to muster till that moment. "But I shall want a fair hearing, too—afterwards."

A faint smile flickered across Chevroll's face.

"I shall want to listen to you," he said. "The confession is this: Last night I went down to the parade to smoke. It was very dark. I don't know exactly what attracted me. I came upon two people saying good-bye on the beach. One of them—a woman—was crying."

He paused momentarily. The girl's face had frozen into set lines of composure. It looked like a marble mask. Her eyes met his with an assumption of indifference that scarcely veiled the desperate denance behind.

"When does the confession begin?" she asked him, with a faint laugh that sounded tragic in spite of her.

He leaned forward, scrutinising her with a wisdom that seemed to pierce every barrier of conventionality and search her very soul.

"It begins now," he said. "She came up on to the parade immediately after, and I waited under a lamp to get a glimpse of her. I saw her face, Mrs Harford. I knew her instantly." The girl's eyes flickered a little, and she bit her lip. She was about to speak, but he stopped her with sudden authority. "No, don't answer!" he said. "Hear me out. I waited till she was gone, and then I joined the young fellow on the beach. He was in the mood for a sympathetic listener, and I drew him out. He told me practically everything—how he himself was going to India and had to leave the girl behind, how her people disapproved of

him, and how she was being worked upon by means little short of persecution to induce her to marry an outsider on the wrong side of forty, with nothing to recommend him but the size of his banking account. He added that she had not a single friend to stand by and make things easier for her. It was that, Miss Harford, that decided me to take this step. I can't see a woman driven against her will; anything in the world sooner than that. And here comes my request. You want a friend to help you. Let me be that friend. There is a way out of this difficulty if you will but take it. Since I got you into it, it is only fair that I should be the one to help you out. This is not a proposal of marriage, though it may sound like one."

He ended with a smile that was perfectly friendly and kind.

The rigid look had completely passed from the girl's face. She was listening with a curious blend of eagerness and reluctance. Her cheeks were burning; her eyes like stars.

"I am so thankful to hear you say that," she said, drawing a deep breath.

"Shall I go on?" said Cheveril.

She hesitated; and very quietly he held out his hand to her.

"In the capacity of a friend," he said gravely.

And Evelyn Harford put her hand into his with the confidence of a child. It was strange to feel her prejudice against this man evaporate at a touch. It made her oddly unsure of herself. He was the last person in the world to whom she would have voluntarily turned for help.

"Don't be startled by what I am going to say," Cheveril said. "It may strike you as an eccentric suggestion, but there is nothing in it to alarm you. Young Willowby tells me that it will take him two years to make a home for you, and meanwhile your life is to be made a martyrdom on my account. Will you put your freedom in my hands for that two years? In other words, will you consider yourself engaged to me for just so long as his absence lasts? It will save

you endless trouble and discomfort, and harm no one. When Willowby comes back, I shall hand you over to him, and your happiness will be secured. Think it over, and don't be scared. You will find me quite easy to manage. In any case, I am a friend you can trust, remember, even though I have got the face of a balloon."

So, with absolute quietness, he made his proposal; and Evelyn, amazed and incredulous, heard him out in silence. At his last words she gave a quick laugh that sounded almost hysterical.

"Oh, don't," she said—"don't! You make me feel so ashamed."

Cheveril's face was suddenly quizzical.

"There is nothing to be ashamed of," he said. "I take all the responsibility, and it would give me very great pleasure to help you."

"But I couldn't do such a thing!" she protested. "I couldn't!"

"Listen!" said Cheveril. "I am off for a yachting trip in the Pacific in a week, and I give you my word of honour not to return for nine months, at least. Will that make it easier for you?"

"I am not thinking of myself," she told him, with vehemence. "Of course, it would make everything right for me, so long as Jim knew. But I must think of you, too. I must——"

"You needn't," Cheveril said gently; "you needn't. I have asked to be allowed to stand by you, to have the great privilege of calling myself your friend in need. I am romantic enough to like to see a love affair go the right way. It is for my pleasure, if you care to regard it from that point of view." He paused, and into his eyes there came a queer, watchful expression—the look of a man who hazards much, yet holds himself in check. Then he smiled at her with battling humour.

"Don't refuse me my opportunity, Miss Harford," he said. "I know I am eccentric, but I assure you I can be a staunch friend to those I like."

Evelyn had risen, and as he ended he also got to his feet. He knew that she was studying him with all her woman's keenness of perception. But the

me was in his hands, and he realised it. He was no longer afraid of the issue.

"You refer me thus out of friendship?" she said at last.

He watched her fingers nervously playing with a bracelet on her wrist.

"Exactly," he said.

Her eyes met his resolutely.

"Mr. Cheveril," she said (and though she spoke quietly, it was with an effort), "I want you, please, to answer just one question. You have been shown all the cards; but there must—there shall be—fair play, in spite of it."

Her voice rang a little. The bracelet suddenly slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. Cheveril stooped and picked it up. He held it as he made reply.

"Yes," he said, "I like fair play, too."

"Then you will tell me the truth?" she said, holding out her hand for her property. "I want to know if—if you were really going to ask me to marry you before this happened."

He looked at her with raised eyebrows. Then he took the extended hand.

"Of course I was," he said simply. She drew back a little, but Cheveril showed no discomfiture. "You see, I'm getting on in life," he said, in a patriarchal tone. "No doubt it was rank presumption on my part to imagine myself in any way suited to you; but I thought it would be nice to have a young wife to look after me. And you know the proverb about 'an old man's darling.' I believe I rather counted on that."

Again he looked quizzical; but the girl was not satisfied.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "You talk as if you were fifty years older than you are. It may be funny, but it isn't strictly honest."

Cheveril laughed.

"I know what you mean," he said. "But really I'm not being funny. And I am telling you the simple truth when I say that all sentimental nonsense was knocked out of me long ago, when the girl I cared for

ran away with a good-looking beast in the Army. Also, I am quite honest when I assure you that I would rather be your trusted friend and accomplice than your rejected suitor. By Jove, I seem to be asking a good deal of you!"

"No, don't laugh," she said quickly, almost as if something in his careless speech had pained her. "We must look at the matter from every standpoint before—before we take any action. Suppose you really did want to marry some one? Suppose you fell in love again? What then?"

"What then?" said Cheveril. And, though he was obligingly serious, she felt that somehow, somewhere, he was tricking her. "I should have to ask you to release me in that event. But I don't think it's very likely that will happen. I'm not so impressionable as I was."

She looked at him doubtfully. Obviously he was not in love with her, yet she was uneasy. She had a curious sense of loss, of disappointment, which even Jim's departure had not created in her.

"I don't feel that I am doing right," she said finally.

"I am quite unscrupulous," said Cheveril lightly. "Moreover, there is no harm to anyone in the transaction. Your life is your own. No one else has the right to order it for you. It seems to me that in this matter you need to consider yourself alone."

"And you," she said, in a troubled tone.

He surprised her an instant later by thrusting a friendly hand through her arm.

"Come!" he said, smiling down at her. "Let us go and announce the good news!"

And so she yielded to him, and went.

* * * * *

The news of Evelyn Harford's engagement to Lester Cheveril was no great surprise to anyone. It leaked out through private sources, it being understood that no public announcement was to be made till the marriage should be imminent. And as Cheveril had departed in his yacht to the Pacific very shortly after

his proposal, there seemed small likelihood of the union taking place that year.

Meanwhile, her long battle over, Evelyn prepared herself to enjoy her hard-earned peace. Her father no longer poured hurricanes of wrath upon her for her obduracy. Her mother's bitter reproaches had wholly ceased. The home atmosphere had become suddenly calm and sunny. The eldest daughter of the house had done her obvious duty, and the family was no longer shaken and upset by internal tumult.

But the peace was only on the surface so far as Evelyn was concerned. Privately, she was less at peace than she had ever been, and that not on her own account or on Jim Willowby's. Every letter she received from the man who had taken her part against himself stirred afresh in her a keen self-reproach and sense of shame. He wrote to her from every port he touched, brief, friendly epistles that she might have shown to all the world, but which she locked away secretly, and read only in solitude. Her letters to him were even briefer, and she never guessed how Cheveril cherished those scanty favours.

So through all that summer they kept up the farce. In the autumn Evelyn went to pay a round of visits at various country houses, and it was while staying from home that a letter from Jim Willowby reached her.

He wrote in apparently excellent spirits. He had had an extraordinary piece of luck, he said, and had been offered a very good post in Burma. If she would consent to go out to him, they could be married at once.

That letter Evelyn read during a solitary ramble over a wide Yorkshire moor, and when she looked up from the box's signature her expression was hunted, even tragic.

Jim had carefully considered ways and means. The thing she had longed for was within her grasp. All she had ever asked for herself was flung to her without stint.

But—what had happened to her? she wondered vaguely—she realised it all fully, completely, yet with no thrill of gladness. Something subtly potent seemed

wound about her heart, holding her back; something that was stronger far than the thought of Jim was calling to her, crying aloud across the barren deserts of her soul. And in that moment she knew that her marriage with Jim had become a final impossibility, and that it was imperative upon her to write at once and tell him so.

She walked miles that day, and returned at length utterly wearied in body and mind. She was facing the hardest problem of her life.

Not till after midnight was her letter to Jim finished, and even then she could not rest. Had she utterly ruined the boy's life? she wondered, as she sealed and directed her crude, piteous appeal for freedom.

When the morning light came grey through her window she was still peering above a blank sheet of note-paper.

This eventually carried but one sentence, addressed to the friend who had stood by her in trouble; and later in the day she sent it by cable to the other side of the world. The message ran: "Please cancel engagement.—Evelyn." His answering cable was brought to her at the dinner-table. Two words only—"Delighted.—Lester."

Out of a mist of floating uncertainty she saw her host bend towards her.

"All well, I trust?" he said kindly.

And she made a desperate effort to control her weakness and reply naturally.

"Oh, quite, quite," she said. "It is exactly what I expected." Nevertheless, she was trembling from head to foot, as if she had been dealt a stunning blow.

Had she altogether expected so prompt and obliging a reply?

* * * * *

Some weeks later, on an afternoon of bleak, early spring, Evelyn wandered alone on the shore where she had bidden Jim Willowby farewell. It was raining, and the sea was grey and desolate. The tide was coming in with a fierce roaring that seemed to fill the whole world

She had a letter from Jim in her hand—his answer to her appeal for freedom; and she had sought the solitude of the shore in which to read it.

She took shelter from the howling sea-wind behind a great boulder of rock. She dreaded his reproaches unspeakably. For the past six weeks she had lived in dread of that moment. Her fingers were shaking as she opened the envelope that bore his boyish scrawl.

An envelope fell out before she had withdrawn his letter. She caught it up hastily before the wind could take possession. It was an unmounted photograph—actually the portrait of a girl.

Evelyn stared at the roguish, laughing face with a great amusement. Then, with a haste that baffled its own ends, she sought his letter.

It began with astounding jauntiness:

"Dear Old Eve,—What a pair of superhuman idiots we have been! Many thanks for your sweet letter, which did me no end of good. I never loved you so much before, dear. Can you believe it? I am not surprised that you feel unequal to the task of keeping me in order for the rest of our natural lives. Will it surprise you to know that I had my doubts on the matter even when I wrote to suggest it? Never mind, dear old girl, I understand. And may the right man turn up soon and make you happy for the rest of your life!

"I am sending a photograph of a girl who till three weeks ago was no more than a friend to me, but has since become my *mancée*. Love is a wonderful thing, Eve. It comes upon you so suddenly and carries you away before you have time to realise what has happened. At least that has been my experience. There is no mistaking the real thing when it actually comes to you.

"I am getting on awfully well, and like the life. By the way, it was through your friend, Lester Cheveril, that I got this appointment. A jolly decent chap that I liked him from the first. It isn't every man who will stand being told he squints without taking offence. We are hoping to get married next month. Write—

won't you?—and send me your blessing. Much love,
—Yours ever,

"JAMES WILLOWBY."

Evelyn looked up from the letter with a deep breath of relief. It was so amazingly satisfactory. She almost forgot the emptiness of her own life for the moment in her rejoicing over Jim's happiness.

There was a little puddle of sea-water at her feet; and she climbed up to a comfortable perch on her sheltering rock and turned her face to the sea. Somehow, it did not seem so desolate as it had seemed five minutes before. This particular seat was a favourite haunt of hers in the summer. She loved to watch the tide come foaming up, and to feel the salt spray in her face.

Five minutes later, a great wave came hurling at the rock on which she sat, and, breaking in a torrent of foam, deluged her from head to foot.

She started up in swift alarm. The tide was coming in fast—much faster than she had anticipated. The shore curved inwards in a deep bay just there, and the cliffs rose sheer and unscalable from it to a considerable height.

Evelyn seldom went down to the shore in the winter, and she was not familiar with its dangers. The sea had seemed far enough out for safety when she had rounded the point nearest to the town, barely half an hour before. It was with almost incredulous horror that she saw that the waves were already breaking at the foot of the cliffs she had skirted.

She turned with a sudden, awful fear at her heart to look towards the farther point. It was a full mile away, and she saw instantly that she could not possibly reach it in time. The waves were already foaming white among the scattered boulders at its base.

Again a great wave broke behind her with a sound like the booming of a gun; and she realised that she would be surrounded in less than thirty seconds if she remained where she was. She slipped and slid down the side of the rock with the speed of terror, and plunged

recklessly into a foot of water at the bottom. Before another wave broke she was dashing and stumbling among the rocks like a frenzied creature seeking safety from the remorseless, devouring monster that roared behind her.

The next five minutes of her life held for her an agony more terrible than anything she had ever known. Sea, sky, wind, and sudden pelting rain seemed leagued against her in a monstrous array against which she battled vainly with her puny woman's strength. The horror of it was like a leaden, paralysing weight. She fought and struggled because instinct compelled her; but at her heart was the awful knowledge that the sea had claimed her and she could not possibly escape.

She made for the farther point of the bay, though she knew she could not reach it in time. The loose shingle crumbled about her feet; the seaweed trapped her everywhere. She fell a dozen times in that awful race, and each time she rose in agony and tore on. The tumult all about her was like the laughter of fiends. She felt as if hell had opened its mouth, and she, poor soul, was its easy prey.

There came a moment at last when she tripped and fell headlong, and could not rise again. That moment was the culmination of her anguish. Neither soul nor body could endure more. Darkness—a howling, unholy darkness—came down upon her in a thick cloud from which there was no escape. She made a futile, convulsive effort to pray, and lost consciousness in the act.

* * * * *

Out of the darkness at length she came.

The tumult was still audible, but it was farther away, less overwhelming. She opened her eyes in a strange, unnatural twilight, and stared vaguely upwards.

At the same instant she became aware of some one at her side, bending over her—a man whose face, revealed to her in the dim light, sent a throb of wonder through her heart.

"You!" she said, speaking with a great effort. "Is it really you?"

He was rubbing one of her hands between his own. He paused to answer.

"Yes; it's really me," he said. And she fancied his voice quivered a little. "They told me I might perhaps find you on the shore. Are you better?"

She tried to sit up, and he helped her, keeping his arm about her shoulders. She found herself lying on a ledge of rock high up in the slanting wall of a deep and narrow cave. She knew the place well, and had always avoided it with instinctive aversion. It was horribly eerie. The rocky walls were wet with the ooze and slime of time ages. There was a trickle of spring water along the ridged floor.

Evelyn closed her eyes dizzily. The marvel of the man's presence was still upon her, but the horror of death haunted her also. She would rather have been drowned outside on the howling shore than here.

"The sea comes in at high tide," she murmured shakily.

Lester Cheveril, crouching beside her, made unaltered reply.

"Yes, I know. But it won't touch us. Don't be afraid!"

The assurance with which he spoke struck her very forcibly; but something held her back from questioning the grounds of his confidence.

"How did you get here?" she asked him instead.

"I saw you from the corner of the bay," he said. "It was before you left your pack. I climbed round the point over the boulders. I thought at the time that there must be some way up the cliff. Then I saw you start running, and I knew you were out off. I yelled to you, but I couldn't make you hear. So I had to give chase."

His arm tightened a little about her.

"I am sorry you were scared," he said. "Are you feeling better now?"

She could not understand him. He spoke with sure entire absence of anxiety. In spite of herself her own fears began to subside.

"Yes, I am better," she said. "But—tell me mor

Why didn't you go back when you saw what had happened?"

"I couldn't," he said simply. "Besides, even if they launched the lifeboat, the chances were dead against their reaching you. I thought of a rope, too. But that seemed equally risky. It was a choice of odds. I chose what looked the easiest."

"And carried me here?" she said.

The light, shining weirdly in upon his face, showed her that he was smiling.

"I couldn't stop to consult you," he said. "I saw this hole, and I made for it. I climbed up with you across my shoulder."

"You are wonderfully strong," she said in a tone of surprise.

He laughed openly.

"Notwithstanding my size," he said. "Yes; I'm fairly muscular, thank Heaven."

Evelyn's mind was still working round the problem of deliverance.

"We shall have to stay here for hours," she said, "even if it is—"

He interrupted her with grave authority.

"There is no 'it,' Miss Harford," he said. "We may have to spend some hours here; but it will be in safety."

"I don't see how you can tell," she ventured to remark, beginning to look around her with greater composure notwithstanding.

"Providence doesn't play practical jokes of that sort," said Cheveril quietly. "Do you know I have come from the other end of the earth to see you?"

She felt the burning colour rush up to her temples, yet she made a determined effort to look him in the face. His eyes, keen and kindly, were searching hers, and she found she could not meet them.

"I—I don't know what brought you," she said, in a very low voice.

She felt the arm that supported her grow rigid, and guessed that he was putting force upon himself as he made reply.

"Let me explain," he said. "You sent me a cablegram which said, 'Please cancel engagement.' Naturally that had but one meaning for me—you and Jim Willowby had got the better of your difficulties, and were going to be married. In the capacity of friend, I received the news with rejoicing. So I cabled back 'Delighted.' Soon after that came a letter from Jim to tell me you had thrown him over. Now, why?"

She answered him with her head bent:

"I found that I didn't care for him quite in that way."

Cheveril did not speak for several seconds. Then, abruptly, he said:

"There is another fellow in the business."

She made a slight gesture of appeal, and remained silent.

He leaned forward slowly at length, and laid his hand upon both of hers.

"Evelyn," he said very gently, "will you tell me his name?"

She shook her head instantly. Her lips were quivering, and she bit them desperately.

He waited, but no word came. Outside, the roaring of the sea was terrible and insistent. The great sound sent a shudder through the girl. She shrank closer to the cold stone.

He pulled off his coat and wrapped it round her. Then, as if she had been a child, he drew her gently into his arms, and held her so.

"Tell me—now," he said softly.

But she hid her face dumbly. No words would come. It seemed a long while before he spoke again.

"That cable of yours was a fraud," he said then. "I was not—I am not—prepared to release you from your engagement except under the original condition."

"I think you must," she said faintly.

He sought for her cold hands and thrust them against his neck. And again there was a long silence, while outside the sea raged fiercely, and far below them in the distance a white streak of foam ran bubbling over the rocky floor.

Soon the streak had become a stream of dancing, sun-flecked water. Evelyn watched it with wide, animated eyes. But she made no sign of fear. She felt as if he had, somehow, laid a quieting hand upon her soul.

Higher the water rose, and higher. The cave was filled with dreadful sound. It was almost dark, for the light had fallen. She felt that but for the man's presence she would have been wild with fear. But his absolute confidence threw a spell about her that no terror could penetrate. The close holding of his arms was infinitely comforting to her. She knew with complete certainty that he was not afraid.

"It's very dark," she whispered to him once; and she pressed her head down upon his breast and told her not to look. Through the tumult she heard the strong, quiet beating of his heart, and was ashamed of her own mortal fear.

It seemed to her that hours passed while she crouched here, listening, as the water rose and rose. She caught the gleam of it now and then, and once her face was wet with spray. She clung closer and closer to her companion, but she kept down her panic. She felt that he expected it of her, and she would have died there in the dark, sooner than have disappointed him.

At last, after an eternity of quiet waiting, he spoke.

"The tide has turned," he said. And his tone carried conviction with it.

She raised her head to look.

A dim, silvery light shone mysteriously in, revealing the black walls above them, the tossing water below. It had been within a foot of their resting-place, but it had dropped fully six inches.

Evelyn felt a great throb of relief pass through her. Only then did she fully realise how great her fear had been.

"Is that the moon?" she asked wonderingly.

"Yes," said Cheveril. He spoke in a low voice, ever with reverence, she thought. "We shall be out of this in an hour. It will light us home."

"How—wonderful!" she said, half involuntarily.

Cheveril said no more ; but the silence that fell between them was the silence of that intimacy which only those who have stood together before the great threshold of death can know. Many minutes passed before Evelyn spoke again, and then her words came slowly, with hesitation.

" You knew ? " she said. " You knew that we were safe ? "

" Yes," he answered quietly ; " I knew. God doesn't give with one hand and take away with the other. Have you never noticed that ? "

" I don't know," she answered with a sharp sigh. " He has never given me anything very valuable."

" Quite sure ? " said Cheveril, and she caught the old quizzical note in his voice.

She did not reply. She was trying to understand him in the darkness, and she found it a difficult matter.

There followed a long, long silence. The roar of the breaking seas had become remote and vague. But the moonlight was growing brighter. The dark cave was no longer a place of horror.

" Shall we go ? " Evelyn suggested at last.

He peered downwards.

" I think we might," he said. " No doubt your people will be very anxious about you."

They climbed down with difficulty, till they finally stood together on the wet stones.

And there Cheveril reached out a hand and detained the girl beside him.

" That other fellow ? " he said in his quiet, half-humorous voice. " You didn't tell me his name."

" Oh, please ! " she said tremulously.

He took her hands gently into his, and stood facing her. The moonlight was full in his eyes. They shone with a strange intensity.

" Do you remember," he said, " how I once said to you that I was romantic enough to like to see a love affair go the right way ? "

She did not answer him. She was trembling in his hold.

He waited for a few seconds ; then spoke, still kindly, but with a force that in a measure compelled her :

"That is why I want you to tell me his name."

She turned her face aside.

"I—I can't!" she said piteously.

"Then I hold you to your engagement," said Lester Cheveril, with quiet determination.

Her hands heapt in his. She threw him a quick, uncertain glance.

"You can't mean that!" she said.

"I do mean it," he rejoined resolutely.

"But—but?" she faltered. "You don't really want to marry ^{me}?" "You can't!"

He looked ^{at} ^{her} ^{for} ^a ^{moment}. Then abruptly he broke into a laugh that rang and echoed exultantly in the deep shadows behind them.

"I want it more than anything else on earth," he said. "Does that satisfy you?"

His face was close to hers, but she felt no desire to escape. That laugh of his was still ringing like sweetest music through her soul.

He took her shoulders between his hands, searching her face closely.

"And now," he said—"now tell me his name!"

Yet a moment longer she withstood him. Then she yielded, and went into his arms, laughing also—a broken, tearful laugh.

"His name is Lester Cheveril," she whispered. "But I—I can't think how you guessed."

He answered her as he turned her face upwards to meet his own.

"The friend who stands by sees many things," he said wisely. "And love is not always blind."

"But you—you weren't in love," she protested. "Not when—"

He interrupted her instantly and convincingly.

"I have always loved you," he said.

And she believed him, because her own heart told her that he had spoken the truth.

THE RIGHT MAN

I

NEW
WI

"He hasn't proposed, then?"

"No; he hasn't." A pause; then, reluctantly: "I haven't given him the opportunity."

"Violet! Do you want to starve?"

The speaker turned in his chair, and looked at the girl bending over the fire, with a quick, impatient frown on his handsome face. They were twins, these two, the only representatives of a family that had been wealthy three generations before them, but whose resources had dwindled steadily under the management of three successive spendthrifts, and had finally disappeared altogether in a desperate speculation which had promised to restore everything.

"You don't seem to realize," the young man said, "that we are absolutely penniless—destitute. Everything is sunk in this Wimbulla Railway scheme, up to the last penny. It seemed a gorgeous chance at the time. It ought to have brought in thousands. It would have done, too, if it had been properly supported. But it's no good talking about that. It's just a gigantic failure, or, if it ever does succeed, it will come too late to help us. Just our infernal luck! And now the question is, what is going to be done? You'll have to marry that fellow, Violet. It's absolutely the only thing for you to do. And I—I suppose I must emigrate!"

The girl did not turn her head. There was something tense about her attitude.

"I could emigrate too, Jerry," she said, in a low voice.

"You!" Her brother turned more fully round.

"You!" he said again. "Are you mad, I wonder?"

She made a slight gesture of protest.

"Why shouldn't I?" she said. "At least, we could be together."

He uttered a grim laugh, and rose.

"Look here, Violet," he said, and took her lightly by the shoulders. "Don't be a little fool! You know

well as I do that you weren't made to rough it. My suggestion is so absurd that it isn't worth discussion.

He'll have to marry Kenyon. It's as plain as daylight; and I only wish my perplexities were as easily solved. Come! He isn't such a bad sort; and, anyhow, he's better than starvation."

The girl stood up slowly and faced him. Her eyes were wild, like the eyes of a hunted creature.

"I hate him, Jerry! I hate him!" she declared vehemently.

"Nonsense!" said Jerry. "He's no worse than a hundred others. You'd hate anyone under these abominable circumstances!"

She shuddered, as if in confirmation of this statement.

"I'd rather do anything," she said; "anything, down to selling matches in the gutter."

"Which isn't a practical point of view," pointed out Jerry. "You would get pneumonia with the first east wind, and die."

"Well, then, I'd rather die." The girl's voice trembled with the intensity of her preference. But her brother frowned again at the words.

"Don't!" he said abruptly. "For Heaven's sake, don't be unreasonable! Can't you see that it's my greatest worry to get you provided for? You must marry. You can't live on charity."

Her cheeks flamed.

"But I can work," she began. "I can——"

He interrupted her impatiently.

"You can't. You haven't the strength, and probably not the ability either. It's no use talking this sort of rot. It's simply silly, and makes things worse for both of us. It's all very well to say you'd rather

starve, but when it comes to starving, as it will—as it must—you'll think differently. Look here, old girl; if you won't marry this fellow for your own sake, do it for mine. I hate it just as much as you do. But it's bearable at least. And there are some things I can't bear."

He stopped. She was clinging to him closely, beseechingly; but he stood firm and unyielding, his young face set in hard lines.

"Will you do it?" he said, as she did not speak.

"Jerry!" she said impudently.

He stiffened to meet the appeal he dreaded. But it did not come. Her eyes were raised to his, and she seemed to read there the futility of argument. She remained absolutely still for some seconds, then abruptly she turned from him and burst into tears.

"Don't! don't!" he said.

He stepped close to her, as she leaned upon the mantelpiece, all the hardness gone from his face. Had she known it, the battle at that moment might have been hers; for he would have insisted no longer. He was on the brink of abandoning the conflict. But her anguish of weeping possessed her to the exclusion of everything else.

"Oh, Jerry, go away!" she sobbed passionately. "You're a perfect beast, and I'm another! But I'll do it, I'll do it—for your sake, as I would do anything in the world, though it's quite true that I'd rather starve!"

And Jerry, rather pale, but otherwise complete master of himself, patted her shoulder with a hasty assumption of kindly approval; and told her that he had always known she was a brack.

II

"Heaven knows I don't aspire to be any particular ornament to society," said Dick Kenyon modestly. "Never have; though I've been pretty well everything else that you can think of, from cow puncher to millionaire. And I can tell you there's a dashed deal more fun

ing the first than the last of those. Still, I think I'd make you comfortable if you would have me ; gh, if you don't want to, just say so, and I'll shunt urther notice."

was thus that he made his proposal to the girl of choice ; and no one hearing it, would have guessed beneath his calm, even phlegmatic, exterior, that he was in a ferment of anxiety. He spoke with a slight d twang that seemed to emphasise his deliberation, his face was mask-like in its composure. Of beauty and none.

his eyes were extraordinarily blue, but the lids were oped over them so heavily that his expression was actually drowsy, even stolid. In build, he was short and thick set, like a bulldog ; and there seemed to be nothing of a bulldog's strength in the breadth of his chest, though there was no hint of energy about him warrant its development.

The girl he addressed did not look at him. She sat perfectly still, with her hands fast clasped together, and her eyes, wide and despairing, fixed upon the fire in front of her. She was wondering desperately how long she could possibly endure it. Yet his last words were somehow not what she had expected from this man whose manner always seemed to hint that at least half the creation was at his sole disposal. They expressed a consideration on his part that she had been far from anticipating. He waited for an interval of several seconds for her to speak. He was standing upon the hearthrug, his ill-proportioned figure thrown into strong relief by the firelight behind him. At last, as she quite failed to answer him, he drew a pace nearer to her.

"Don't mind me, Miss Trelevan," he said, in a drawl so exaggerated that she thought it must be intentional. "Take your time. There's no hurry. I've always thought it was a bit hard on a woman to expect her to answer an offer of marriage off-hand. Perhaps you'd rather write?"

"No," she said rather breathlessly. "No!" Then, after a pause, still more breathlessly: "Won't you sit down?"

He stepped away from her again, to her infinite relief, and sat down a couple of yards away.

There ensued a most painful silence, during which the battle in the girl's heart raged fiercely. Then at length she took her resolution in both hands, and faced him. He was not looking at her. He sat quite still, and she fancied that his eyes were closed; but when she spoke he turned his head, and she realised that she had been mistaken.

"I can give you your answer now," she said, making the greatest effort of her life. "It is—it is—yes."

She rose with the words, almost as if in preparation for headlong flight. But Dick Kenyon kept his seat. He leaned forward a little, his blue eyes lifted to her face.

"Your final word, Miss Trevelyan?" he asked her, in his cool, easy twang.

She wrung her hands together with an unconscious gesture of despair.

"Yes," she said; and added feverishly: "of course."

"You think you've met the right man?" he pursued, his tone one of gentle inquiry, as if he were speaking to a child.

She nodded. She was white to the lips.

"Yes," she said again.

He got up then with extreme deliberation.

"Well," he said, a curious smile flickering about his mouth, "that's about the biggest surprise I've ever had. And I don't mind telling you so. Sure now that you're not making a mistake?"

She uttered a little laugh that sounded hysterical.

"Oh, don't!" she said. "Don't! I have given you my answer!"

"And I'm to take you seriously?" questioned Kenyon. "Very well. I will. But you mustn't be frightened."

He stretched out a steady hand, and laid it on her shoulder. She quivered at his touch, but she did not attempt to resist.

"Don't be scared," he said very gently. "I know I'm as ugly as blazes; at least, I've been told so, but there's nothing else to alarm you if you can once get over that."

There was a note of quaint raillery in his voice. He did not try to draw her to him. Yet she was conscious of a strength that did battle with her half-instinctive aversion—a strength that might have compelled, but preferred to attract.

Unwillingly, at length, she looked at him, meeting his eyes, good humouredly, critical, watching her.

"I am not frightened," she said, with an effort. "It's only that—just at first—till I get used to it—it feels rather strange."

There was unconscious pleading in her voice. He took his hand from her shoulder, looking at her with his queer, speculative smile.

"I don't want to hustle you any," he said. "But if that's all the trouble, I guess I know a remedy."

Violet drew back sharply.

"Oh, no!" she said. "No!"

She was terrified for the moment lest he should desire to put his remedy to the test. But he made no movement in her direction, and another sort of misgiving assailed her.

"Don't be vexed," she said unsteadily. "I—I know I'm despicable. But I shall get over it—if you will give me time."

"Bless your heart, I'm not vexed," said Kenyon. "I'm only wondering, don't you know, how you brought yourself to say 'Yes' to me. But no matter, dear. I'm grateful all the same."

He held out his hand to her, and she laid hers nervously within it. She could not meet his eyes any longer.

Kenyon stooped and put his lips to her cold fingers.

"Jove!" he said softly. "I'm in luck to-day."

And after that he sat down again, and began to behave like an ordinary visitor.

III

"Great Scotland!" said Jerry.

He looked up from a letter, and gazed at his sister with starting eyes.

"Oh, what?" she exclaimed in alarm.

He sprang up impetuously, and went round the table to her. They were breakfasting in the tiny flat which was theirs for but three short months longer.

"Guess!" he said. "No, don't! I can't wait. It's the family luck, old girl, turned at last! It's the original gorgeous chance again with a practical dead certainty pushing behind. It's the Winhalla Railway turning up trumps just in time."

And, with a whoop that might have been heard from garret to basement, Jerry swept his sister from her chair, and waltzed her giddily round the little room till she cried breathlessly for mercy.

"Oh, but do tell me!" she gasped, when he set her down again. "I want to understand, Jerry. Don't be so mad. Tell me exactly what has happened!"

"I'll tell you," said Jerry, sitting down on the tablecloth. "It's a letter from Gardner—my broker and man of business generally—written last night to tell me that one of these swaggering capitalists has got hold of the Winhalla Railway scheme, and is going to make things hum. Shares are going up already; and they'll run sky high by the end of the week. It's bound to be all right. It was always sound enough. It only wanted capital. He doesn't tell me the bounder's name, but that's no matter. I don't want to go into partnership. I shall sell, sell, sell, at the top of the boom. Gardner's to be trusted. He'll know—and then—and then——"

"Yes; what does it mean?" the girl broke in. "I want to know exactly, Jerry!"

"Mean?" he echoed, his hands upon her shoulders. "It means emancipation, wealth, everything we've lost back again, and more to it! Now do you understand?"

She gasped for breath. She had turned very pale.

"Oh, Jerry!" she said tragically. "Jerry, why didn't this happen before?"

He stared at her for a moment. Then, as understanding came to him, he frowned with swift impatience.

"Oh, that must be broken off!" he said. "You can't marry that fellow now. Why should you?"

Violet shook her head hopelessly.

"I've promised," she said; "promised to marry him at the end of next month."

Jerry jumped up impulsively.

"But that's soon arranged," he declared. "Leave it to me. I'll explain."

"How can you?" questioned Violet.

"I shall put it on a purely business footing," he returned airily. "Don't you worry yourself. He isn't the sort of chap to take it to heart. You know that as well as I do. Perhaps it might be as well to wait till the end of the week and make sure of things, though, before I say anything."

But at this point Violet gave him the biggest surprise he had ever known. She sprang to her feet with flashing eyes.

"Indeed you won't, Jerry!" she exclaimed. "You will tell him to-day—this morning—and end it definitely. Never mind what happens afterwards. I won't carry the dishonourable bargain to that length. I've little enough self-respect left, but what there is of it I'll keep!"

"Heavens above!" ejaculated Jerry, in amazement. "What's the matter now? I was only thinking of you, after all."

"I know you were," she answered passionately. "But you're to think of something greater than my physical welfare. You're to think of my miserable little rag of honour, and do what you can for that, if you really want to help me!"

And with that she went quickly from the room, and left him to breakfast alone.

He marvelled for a little at her agitation, and then the contents of the letter absorbed him again. He had better go and see Gardner, he reflected; and then, if the thing really seemed secure, he would take Dick Kenyon on his way back—perhaps lunch with him, and explain matters in a friendly way. There was certainly nothing for Violet to make a fuss about. He

was quite fully convinced that the fellow wouldn't care. Marriage was a mere incident to men of his stamp.

So, cheerily at length, having disposed of his breakfast, he rose, collected his correspondence, which consisted for the most part of bills, and, whistling light-heartedly, took his departure.

IV

"Now," said Dick Kenyon, in his easy, self-assured accents, "sit down right there, sonny, and tell me what's on your mind."

He pressed Jerry into his most comfortable chair with hospitable force.

Jerry submitted, because he could not help himself, rather than from choice. Patronage from Dick Kenyon was something of an offence to his ever-ready pride.

As for Dick, he had not apparently the smallest suspicion of any latent resentment of this nature in his visitor's mind. He brought out a box of choice cigars, and set them at Jerry's elbow. They had just lunched together at Kenyon's room; and it had been quite obvious to the latter that Jerry had been preoccupied throughout the meal.

Having furnished his guest with everything he could think of to ensure his comfort, he proceeded deliberately to provide for his own.

Jerry was not quite at his ease. He sat with the unlighted cigar between his fingers, considering with bent brows. Kenyon looked at him at last with a faint smile.

"If I didn't know it to be an impossibility," he said, "I should say you were shying at something."

Jerry turned towards him with an air of resolution.

"Look here, Kenyon," he said, in his slightly superior tones, "I have really come to talk to you about your engagement to my sister."

He paused, aware of a change in Kenyon's expression, but wholly unable to discover of what it consisted.

"What about it?" said Kenyon.

He was on his feet, searching the mantelpiece for an ash-tray. His face was turned from Jerry, but could he have seen it fully, it would have told him nothing.

Jerry went on, with a strong effort to maintain his ease of manner:

"We've been thinking it over, and we have come to the conclusion that perhaps, after all, it was a mistake. In short, my sister has thought better of it; and, as she is naturally sensitive on the subject, I undertook to tell you so. I don't suppose it will make any particular difference to you. There are plenty of girls who would jump at the chance of marrying your millions. But, of course, if you wish it, some compensation could be made."

Jerry paused again. He had placed the matter on the most business-like footing that had occurred to him. Of course, the man must realise that he was a rank outsider, and would understand that it was the best method.

Kenyon heard him out in dead silence. He had found the ash-tray, but he did not turn his head. After several dumb seconds, he walked across the room to the window, and stood there. Finally he spoke.

"I don't suppose," he said, in his calm, expressionless drawl, "that you have ever had a cowhiding in your life, have you?"

"What?" said Jerry.

He stared at Kenyon in frank amazement. Was the man mad?

"Never had a cowhiding in your life, eh?" repeated Kenyon, without moving.

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Jerry.

Kenyon remained motionless.

"I mean," he said calmly, "that I've thrashed a man to a pulp before now for a good deal less than you have just offered me. It's my special treatment for cowards. Suits 'em wonderfully. And suits me, too."

Jerry sprang to his feet in a whirl of wrath, but before he could utter a word Kenyon suddenly turned.

"Go back to your sister," he said, in curt, stern tones, "and tell her from me that I will discuss this matter

with her alone. If she intends to throw me over, she must come to me herself and tell me so. Go now!"

But Jerry stood halting between an open blaze of passion and equally open discomfiture. He longed to hurl defiance in Kenyon's face, but some hidden force restrained him. There was that about the man at that moment which compelled submission. And so, at length, he turned without another word, and walked straight from the room with as fine a dignity as he could muster. By some remarkable means, Dick Kenyon had managed to get the best of the encounter.

V

Not the next day, nor the next, did Violet Trelevan summon up courage to face her outraged lover, and ask for her freedom. Jerry did not tell her precisely what had passed, but she gathered from the information he vouchsafed that Kenyon had not treated the matter peaceably. She wondered a little how Jerry had approached it, and told herself with a beating heart that she would have to take her own line of action.

Nevertheless, for a full week she did nothing, and at the end of that week the flutter in the Winifreda Railway shares had subsided completely, and all Jerry's high hopes were dead. From day to day he had tried to console himself and her with the reflection that a speculation of that sort was bound to fluctuate, but, in the end, when the shares went down to zero, he was forced to own that he had been too sanguine. It had been but the last flicker before extinction. The capitalist had evidently thought better of risking his money on such a venture.

"And I was a gaping, weak-kneed idiot not to sell for what I could get!" he told his sister. "But it's just our luck. I might have known nothing decent could ever happen to us!"

It was on that evening, when the outlook was at its blackest, that Violet wrote at last, without consulting Jerry, to the man in whose hands lay her freedom.

It was a short epistle, and humbly worded, for she realised that this, at least, was his due.

"I want you," she wrote, "to forgive me, if you can, for the wrong I have done you, and to set me free. I accepted you upon impulse, I am ashamed to say, for the sake of your money. But the shame would be even greater if I did not tell you so. I do not know what view you will take, but my own is that, in releasing me, you will not lose anything that is worth having."

The answer to this appeal came the next day by hand.

"May I see you alone at your flat at five o'clock?"

She had not expected it, and she felt for an instant as if a master hand had touched her, sending the blood tingling through her veins like fire. She sent a reply in the affirmative; and then set herself to face the longest day she had ever lived through.

She sat alone during the afternoon, striving desperately to nerve herself for the ordeal. But strive as she might, the fact remained that she was horribly, painfully frightened. There was something about this man which it seemed futile to resist, something that dominated her, something against which it hurt her to fight.

She heard his ring punctually upon the stroke of five, and she went herself to answer it.

He greeted her with his usual serenity of manner.

"All alone?" he asked, as he followed her into the little drawing room in which he had proposed to her so short a time before.

She assented nervously.

"Jerry went into the City. He won't be back yet."

"That's kind of you," said Kenyon quietly.

She did not ask him to sit down. They faced each other on the hearthrug. The strong glare of the electric light showed him that she was very pale.

Abruptly he thrust out his hand to her.

"You must forgive me for bullying your brother the other day," he said. "Really, he deserved it."

She glanced up quickly.

"Jerry doesn't understand," she said.

He kept his hand outstretched though she did not take it.

"I don't understand, either," he said.

"Do you really want to shake hands with me?" she murmured, her voice very low.

"I want to hold your hand in mine, if I may," he answered simply. "I think it will help to solve the difficulty. Thank you! Yes; I thought you were trembling. Now, why, I wonder?"

She did not answer him. Her head was bent.

"Don't!" he said gently. "There is no cause. Didn't I tell you I would shut it if you didn't want me?"

Still she was silent, her hand lying passive in his.

"Come!" he said. "I want to understand, don't you know. That note of yours. You say in it that you accepted me for the sake of my money. Even so. But I reckon that is more a reason for sticking to me than for throwing me over."

He paused, but her head only drooped a little lower.

"Doesn't that reason still exist?" he asked her, point blank.

She shivered at the direct question, but she answered it.

"Yes; it does. And that's why I'm ashamed to go on."

"Why ashamed?" he asked. "How do you know my reason for wanting to marry you is no good since I never told you what it was?"

She looked up then, suddenly and swiftly, and caught a curious glint in the blue eyes that watched her.

"I do know," she said, speaking quickly, impulsively. "And that's why—I can't bear—that you should despise me."

"Ah!" he said. "Do you really care what an outsider like myself thinks of you?"

The colour flamed suddenly in her white face, but he went on in his quiet drawl as if he had not seen it:

"If I thought it was for your happiness, believe me, I would set you free. But, so far, you haven't given me any reason that could justify such a step. Can't you think of one? Honestly, now?"

She shook her head. Her eyes were full of blinding tears.

"What is it, then?" urged Kenyon. And suddenly his voice was as soft as a woman's. "Has the right man turned up unexpectedly, after all? Is it for his sake?"

"Oh, don't!" she cried passionately. "Don't! You hurt me!"

And, turning sharply from him, she hid her face, and broke into anguished weeping.

Kenyon stood quite still for perhaps ten seconds; then he moved close to her, and put his arm round the slight, sobbing figure.

She did not start or attempt to resist him.

"There, there!" he whispered soothingly. "I knew there was a reason. Don't cry, dear. It will be all right—all right. Never mind the beastly money. There's going to be a big boom in the Winhalla Railway shares, and you'll make your fortune over it. Yes; I know all about that. A friend told me. There's a big capitalist pushing behind. They have gone down this week, but they are going to rise like a spring tide next. And then—you'll be free to marry the right man, eh, dear? I shan't stand in your way. I'll even come and dance at the wedding, if you'll have me."

She uttered a muffled laugh through her tears, and turned slightly towards him within the encircling arm.

"I hope you will," she murmured. "Because—because——" She broke off, and became silent.

Dick Kenyon's arm did not slacken.

"If you could make it convenient to finish that sentence of yours, I'd be real grateful," he observed at length.

She lifted her face from her hands, and looked him in the eyes. Her own were shining.

"Because," she said unsteadily, "I couldn't marry the right man—if you weren't there."

He looked straight back at her without a hint of emotion in his heavy eyes.

"Quite sure of that?" he asked.

And she laughed again tremulously as she made reply.

"Quite sure, Dick," she said softly, "though I've only just found it out."

* * * * *

Jerry, tearing in a little later, bristling of City news, noticed that his sister's face was brighter than usual, but failed, in his excitement, to perceive a visitor in the room, the visitor not troubling himself to rise at his entrance.

"News, Vi!" he shouted. "Gorgeous news! The Winhalla Railway is turning up triumphs! The shares are simply flying up. I told Gardner I'd sell at fifty, but he says they are worth holding on to, for they'll go above that. He vows they're safe. And who do you think is the capitalist that's pushing behind? Why, Kenyon!"

He broke off abruptly at this point as Kenyon himself arose leisurely with a serene smile and outstretched hand.

"Exactly—Kenyon!" he said. "But if you think he's a rank bad speculator, like yourself, sonny, you're mistaken. I didn't make my money that way, and I don't reckon to lose it that way, either. But Gardner's right. Those shares are safe. They aren't going down again ever any more."

He turned to the girl on his other side, and laid his free hand on her shoulder.

"And I guess you'll forgive me for distressing you," he said, "when I tell you why I did it."

"Well, why, Dick?" she questioned, her face turned to his.

"I just thought I'd like to know, dear," he drawled, "if there wasn't something bigger than money to be got out of this deal. And—are you listening, Jerry?—I found there was!"

THE KNIGHT ERRANT

I

THE APPEAL

THE Poor Relation hoisted one leg over the arm of his chair, and gazed contemplatively at the ceiling.

"Now, I wonder whom I ought to scrag for this," he mused aloud.

A crumpled newspaper lay under his hand, a certain paragraph uppermost that was strongly scored with red ink. He had read it twice already, and after a thoughtful pause he proceeded to read it again.

"A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place between Cecil Mordaunt Rivington and Ernestine, fourth daughter of Lady Florence Cardwell."

"Why Ernestine, I wonder?" murmured the Poor Relation. "I thought she was still in short frocks. Used to be rather a jolly little kid. Wonder what she thinks of the arrangement?"

A faint smile cocked one corner of his mouth—a very plain mouth which he wore no moustache to hide.

"And Lady Florence! Ye gods! Wonder what she thinks!"

The smile developed into a snigger, and vanished at a breath.

"But it's really infernally awkward," he declared. "Ought one to go and apologise for what one hasn't done? Really, I don't know if I dare!"

Again, as one searching for inspiration, he read the brief paragraph.

"It looks to me, Cecil Mordaunt, as if you are in for

a very warm time," he remarked at the end of this final inspection. "Such a time as you haven't had since you left Rugby. If you take my advice you'll sit tight like a sensible chap and leave this business to engineer itself. No good ever came of meddling."

With which practical reflection he rose to fill and light a briar pipe, his inseparable companion, before grappling with his morning correspondence.

This lay in a neat pile at his elbow, and after a ruminative pause devoted to the briar pipe, he applied himself deliberately to its consideration.

The first two he examined and tossed aside with a bored expression. The third seemed to excite his interest. It was directed in a nervous, irregular hand that had tried too hard to be firm, and had spluttered the ink in consequence. The envelope was of a pearly grey tint. The Poor Relation started at it, and turned up his nose.

Nevertheless, he opened the misgiver with a promptitude that testified to a certain amount of curiosity.

"Dear Knight Errant," he read, in the same desperate handwriting. "Do you remember once years ago coming to the rescue of a lady in distress who was chased by a bull? The lady has never forgotten it. Will you do the same again for the same lady to-day, and earn her undying gratitude? If so, will you confirm the statement in the *Morning Post* as often and as convincingly as you can till further notice? I wonder if you will? I do wonder. I couldn't ask you if you were anything but poor and a sort of relation as well.—Yours, *in extremis*,

"ERNESTINE CARDWELL.

"P.S.—Of course, don't do it if you would really rather not."

"Thank you, Ernestine!" said the Poor Relation. "That last sentence of yours might be described as the saving clause. I would very much rather not, if the truth be told; which it probably never will be. As you have shrewdly foreseen, the subtlety of your 'in

extremis' draws me in spite of myself. I have seen you *in extremis* before, and I must admit the spectacle made something of an impression."

He read the letter again with characteristic deliberation, lay back awhile with pale blue eyes fixed unswervingly upon the ceiling, and finally rose and betook himself to his writing table.

"Dear Lady in Distress," he wrote. "I am pleased to note that even poor relations have their uses. As your third cousin removed to the sixth or seventh degree, I shall be most happy to serve you. Pray regard me as unreservedly at your disposal. Awaiting your further commands.—Your devoted

"KNIGHT ERRANT."

This letter he directed to Miss Ernestine Cardwell and dispatched by special messenger. Then, with a serene countenance, he glanced through his remaining correspondence, stretched himself, yawned, looked out of the window, and finally sauntered forth to his club.

II

CONGRATULATIONS

"Ye gods! I should think Lady Florence is feelin' pretty furious. The fellow hasn't a penny, and isn't even an honourable. I thought all her daughters were to be princesses or duchesses or ranees or somethin' imposin'."

Archie Fielding, gossip-in-chief of the Junior Sherwood Club, beat a rousing tattoo on the table, and began to whistle Mendelssohn's "Wedding March."

"Wonder if he will want me to be best man," he proceeded. "It'll be the seventh time this season. Think I shall make a small charge for my services for the future. Not to poor old Cecil, though. He's always hard-up. I wonder what they'll live on. I'll bet Miss Ernestine hasn't been brought up on cheese and smoked herrings."

"Which is Ernestine?" asked another member, generally known at the club as "that ass Bray." "The little one, isn't it; the one that laughs?"

"The cheeky one—yes," said Archie. "I saw her ridin' in the Park with Dinghra the other day. Awful brute, Dinghra, if he is a rajah's son."

"Shocking boulder!" said Bray. "But rich—a quality that covers a multitude of sins."

"Especially in Lady Florence's estimation," remarked Archie. "She's had designs on him ever since Easter. Ernestine is a nice little thing, you know, but somehow she hangs fire. A trifle over-independent, I suppose, and she has a sharp tongue, too—tells the truth a bit too often, don't you know. I don't get on with that sort of girl myself. But I'll swear Dinghra is head over ears, the brute. I'd give twenty pounds to punch his evil mouth."

"Yes, he's pretty foul, certainly. But apparently she isn't for him. I'm surprised that Cecil has taken the trouble to compete. He's kept mighty quiet about it. I've met him hardly anywhere this season."

"Oh, he's a lazy animal! But he always does things on the quiet; it is his nature to. He's the sort of chap that thinks for about twenty years, and then goes straight and does the one and only thing that no one else would dream of doin'. I rather fancy, for all his humdrum ways, he would be a difficult man to thwart. I'd give a good deal to know how he got over Lady Florence, though. He has precious little to recommend him as a son-in-law."

At this point some one kicked him violently, and he looked up to see the subject of his harangue sauntering up the room.

"Are you talking about me?" he inquired, as he came. "Don't let me interrupt, I beg. I know I'm an edifying topic, eh, Archibald?"

"Oh, don't ask me to praise you to your face," said Archie, quite unperturbed. "How are you, old chap? We are all gapin' with amazement over this mornin's news. Is it really true? Are we to congratulate?"

"Are you referring to my engagement?" asked the

Poor Relation, pausing in the middle of the group. "Yes, of course it's true. Do you mean to say you were such a pack of dunderheads you didn't see it coming?"

"There wasn't anything to see," protested Archie. "You've been lyin' low, you howlin' hypocrite! I always said you were a dark horse."

The Poor Relation smiled upon him tolerantly.

"Can't you call me anything else interesting? It seems to have hurt your feelings rather, not being in the know. I can't understand your not smelling a rat. Where are your wits, man?"

He tapped Archie's head smartly with his knuckles, and passed on, the smile still wrinkling his pale eyes and the forehead above them from which the hair was steadily receding towards the top of his skull.

Certainly the gods had not been kind to him in the matter of personal beauty, but a certain charm he possessed, notwithstanding, which procured for him a well-grounded popularity.

"You'll let me wish you luck, anyway, Rivington," one man said.

"Rather!" echoed Archie. "I hope you'll ask me to your weddin'."

"All of you," said the Poor Relation generously. "It's going to be a mountainous affair, and Archie shall officiate as best man."

"When is it to take place?" some one asked.

"Oh, very soon—very soon indeed; actual date not yet fixed. St. George's, Hanover Square, of course; and afterwards at Lady Florence Cardwell's charming mansion in Park Lane. It'll be a thrilling performance altogether." The Poor Relation beamed impartially upon his well-wishers. He seemed to be hugely enjoying himself.

"And whither will the happy pair betake themselves after the reception?" questioned Archie.

"That, my dear fellow, is not yet quite decided."

"I expect you'll go for a motor tour," said Bray.

But Rivington at once shook his head.

"Nothing of that sort. Couldn't afford it. No, we shall do something cheaper and more original than that."

"I've got an old caravan somewhere; that might do. Rather a bright idea, eh, Archie?"

"Depends on the bride," said Archie, looking decidedly dubious.

"Eh? Think so? We shall have to talk it over." The Poor Relation subsided into a chair, and stretched himself with a sigh. "There are such a lot of little things to be considered when you begin to get married," he murmured, as he pulled out his pipe.

"Some one wanting you on the telephone, sir," announced one of the club attendants at his elbow a few minutes later.

"Eh? Who is it? Tell 'em I can't be bothered. No, don't! I'm coming."

Laboriously he hoisted himself out of his chair, regretfully he knocked the glowing tobacco out of his pipe, heavy-footed he betook him to the telephone.

"Hullo!"

"Oh!" said a woman's voice. "Is that you?"

"Yes. Who do you want?"

"Mr. Rivington—Ceil Modanant Rivington." The syllables came with great distinctness. They seemed to have an anxious ring.

"Yes, I'm here," said the owner of the name. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ernestine. Can you hear me?"

"First-rate! What can I do for you?"

There was a pause, then

"I had your letter," said the voice, "and I'm tremendously grateful to you. I was afraid you might be vexed."

"Not a bit of it," said Rivington genially. "Anything to oblige."

"Thanks so much! It was great cheek, I know, but I've had such a horrid fright. I couldn't think of any other way out, and you were the only possible person that occurred to me. You were very kind to me once, a long time ago. It's awfully decent of you not to mind."

"Please don't!" said Rivington. "That sort of thing always upsets me. Look here, can't we meet

somewhere and talk things over? It would simplify matters enormously."

"Yes, it would. That is what I want to arrange. Could you manage some time this afternoon? Please if you can!"

"Of course I can," said Rivington promptly. "What time?"

"I don't know. It must be somewhere right away where no one will know us."

"How would the City do? That's nice and private."

A faint laugh came to his ear. "Yes; but where?" Rivington briefly considered.

"St. Paul's Cathedral, under the dome, three o'clock. Will that do?"

"Yes, I'll be there. You won't fail?"

"Not if I live," said Rivington. "Anything else?"

"No; only a million thanks! I'll explain everything when we meet."

"All right. Good-bye!"

As he hung up the receiver a heavy frown drove the kindness out of his face.

"What have they been doing to the child?" he said.

"It's a pretty desperate step for a girl to take. At least it might be, it would be, if I were anyone else."

Suddenly the smile came back and drew afresh the kindly, humorous lines about his eyes.

"She seems to remember me rather well," he murmured. "She certainly was a jolly little kid."

III

THE LADY IN DISTRESS

The afternoon sunlight streamed golden through the cathedral as Cecil Rivington passed into its immense silence. He moved with quiet and leisurely tread; it was not his way to hurry. The great clock was just booming the hour.

There were not many people about. A few stray footsteps wandered through the stillness, a few vague

whispers floated to and fro. But the peace of the place lay like a spell, a dream atmosphere in which every sound was hushed.

Rivington passed down the nave till he reached the central space under the great dome. There he paused, and gazed straight upwards into the giddy height above him.

As he stood thus calmly contemplative, a light step sounded on the pavement close to him, and a low voice spoke.

"Oh, here you are! It's good of you to be so punctual."

He lowered his eyes slowly as if he were afraid of giving them a shock, and turned them upon the speaker.

"I am never late," he remarked. "And I am never early."

Then he smiled kindly and held out his hand.

"Hullo, Chirpy!" he said. "It is Chirpy, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is Chirpy. But I never expected you to remember that."

"I remember most things," said Rivington.

His pale eyes dwelt contemplatively on the girl before him. She was very slim and young, and plainly very nervous. There was no beauty about Ernestine Cardwell, only a certain wild grace peculiarly charming, and a quick wit that some people found too shrewd. When she laughed she was a child. Her laugh was irresistible, and there was magic in her smile, a baffling, elusive magic too transient to be defined. Very sudden and very fleeting was her smile. Rivington saw it for an instant only as she met his look.

"Do you know," she said, colouring deeply, "I thought you were much older than you are."

"I am fifty," said Rivington.

But she shook her head.

"It is very good of you to say so."

"Not at all," smiled Rivington. "You, I fancy, must be about twenty-one. How long since the bull episode?"

"Oh, do you remember that, too?" She uttered a faint laugh.

"Vividly," said Rivington. "I have a lively memory of the fleetness of your retreat and the violence of your embrace when the danger was over."

She laughed again.

"It was years and years ago—quite six, I should think."

"Quite, I should say," agreed Rivington. "But we have met since then, surely?"

"Oh, yes, casually. But we are not in the same set, are we? Some one once told me you were very Bohemian."

"Who was it? I should like to shoot him!" said Rivington.

At which she laughed again, and then threw a guilty glance around.

"I don't think this is a very good place for a talk."

"Not if you want to do much laughing," said Rivington. "Come along to the tea-shop round the corner. No one will disturb us there."

They turned side by side, and began to walk back. The girl moved quickly as though not wholly at her ease. She glanced at her companion once or twice, but it was not till they finally emerged at the head of the steps that she spoke.

"I am wondering more and more how I ever had the impertinence to do it."

"There's no great risk in asking a poor relation to do anything," said Rivington consolingly.

"Ah, but I did it without asking." There was an unmistakable note of distress in her quick rejoinder. "I was at my wits' end. I didn't know what on earth to do. And it came to me suddenly like an inspiration. But I wish I hadn't now, with all my heart."

Rivington turned his mild eyes upon her.

"My dear child, don't be silly!" he said. "I am delighted to be of use for a change. I don't do much worth the doing, being more or less of a loafer. It is good for me to exercise my ingenuity now and then. It only gets rusty lying by."

She put out her hand impulsively and squeezed his. "You're awfully nice to me," she said. "It's only a temporary expedient, of course. I couldn't ask you first—there wasn't time. But I'll set you free as soon as I possibly can. Have people been talking much?"

"Rather! They are enjoying it immensely. I have had to go ahead like steam. I've even engaged a best man."

She threw him a startled look.

"Oh, but—"

"No, don't be alarmed," he said reassuringly. "It's best to take the bull by the horns, believe me. The more fuss you make at the outset, the quicker it will be over. People will be taking us for granted in a week."

"You think so?" she said doubtfully. "I can't think what mother will say. I don't dare think."

"Is your mother away, then?"

"Yes, in Paris for a few days. I couldn't have done it if she had been at home. I don't know quite what I should have done." She broke off with a sudden shudder. "I've had a horrid fright," she said again.

"Come and have some tea," suggested Rivington practically.

IV

A COUNCIL OF WAR

They had tea in a secluded corner, well removed from all prying eyes. Gradually, as the minutes passed, the girl's manner became more assured.

When at length he leaned his elbows on the table and said, "Tell me all about it," she was ready.

She leaned towards him, and dropped her voice.

"You know Mr. Dinghra Singh? I'm sure you do. Every one does."

"Yes, I know him. They call him Nana Sahib at the clubs."

She shuddered again.

"I used to like him rather. He has a wicked sort of

fascination, you know. But I loathe him now ; I abhor him. And—I am terrified at him."

She stopped. Rivington said nothing. There was not much expression in his eyes. Without seeming to scan very closely, they rested on her face.

After a moment, in a whisper, she continued :

"He follows me about perpetually. I meet him everywhere. He looks at me with horrid eyes. I know, without seeing, the instant he comes into the room."

She paused. Rivington still said nothing.

"He is very rich, you know," she went on, with an effort. "He will be Rajah of Ferosha some day. And, of course, every one is very nice to him in consequence. I never was that. Don't think it! But I used to laugh at him. It's my way. Most men don't like it. No Englishmen do that I know of. But he—this man—is, somehow, different from every one else. And—can you believe it?—he is literally stalking me. He sends me presents—exquisite things, jewellery, that my mother won't let me return. I asked him not to once, and he laughed in my face. He has a horrible laugh. He is half English, too. I believe that makes him worse. If he were an out-and-out native he wouldn't be quite so revolting. Of course, I see my mother's point of view. Naturally, she would like me to be a princess, and, as she says, I can't pick and choose. Which is true, you know," she put in quaintly, "for men don't like me as a rule; at least, not the marrying sort. I rather think I'm not the marrying sort myself. I've never been in love, never once. But I couldn't—I could not—marry Dighra. But it's no good telling him so. The cooler I am to him the hotter he seems to get, till—till I'm beginning to wonder how I can possibly get away."

The note of distress sounded again in her voice. Very quietly, as though in answer to it, Rivington reached out a hand and laid it over hers.

But his eyes never varied as he said :

"Won't you finish?"

She bent her head.

"You'll think me foolish to be so easily scared,"

she said, a slight catch in her voice. "Most women manage to take care of themselves. I ought to be able to."

"Please go on," he said. "I don't think you foolish at all."

She continued, without raising her eyes:

"Things have been getting steadily worse. Last week at Lady Villar's ball I had to dance with him four times. I tried to refuse, but mother was there. She wouldn't hear of it. You know?" appealingly—"she is so experienced. She knows how to insist without seeming to, so that, unless one makes a scene, one has to yield. I thought each dance that he meant to propose, but I just managed to steer clear. I felt absolutely delirious the whole time. Most people thought I was enjoying it. Old Lady Phillips told me I was looking quite handsome." She laughed a little. "Well, after all, there seemed to be no escape, and I got desperate. It was like a dreadful nightmare. I went to the opera one night, and he came and sat close behind me and talked in whispers. When he wasn't talking I knew that he was watching me—gloating over me. It was horrible—horrible! Last night I wouldn't go out with the others. I simply couldn't face it. And—do you know—he came to me!" She began to breathe quickly, unevenly. The hands that lay in Rivington's quiet grasp moved with nervous restlessness. "There was no one in the house besides the servants," she said. "What could I do? He was admitted before I knew. Of course, I ought to have refused to see him, but he was very insistent, and I thought it a mistake to seem afraid. So I went to him—I went to him."

The words came with a rush. She began to tremble all over. She was almost sobbing.

Rivington's fingers closed very slowly, barely perceptibly, till his grip was warm and close. "Take your time," he said gently. "It's all right, you know—all right."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Well, I saw him. He was in a dangerous—a wild-beast mood. He told

me I needn't try to run away any longer, for I was caught. He said—and I know it was true—that he had obtained my mother's full approval and consent. He swore that he wouldn't leave me until I promised to marry him. He was terrible, with a sort of suppressed violence that appalled me. I tried not to let him see how terrified I was. I kept quite quiet and temperate for a long time. I told him I could never, never marry him. And each time I said it he smiled and showed his teeth. He was like a tiger. His eyes were mandish. But he, too, kept quiet for ever so long. He tried persuasion, he tried flattery. Oh, it was loathsome—loathsome! And then quite suddenly he turned savage, and—*and* threatened me."

She glanced nervously into Rivington's face, but it told her nothing. He looked merely thoughtful.

She went on more quietly.

"That drove me desperate, and I exclaimed, hardly thinking, 'I wouldn't marry you if you were the only man in the world—which you are not!' 'Oh!' he said at once. 'There is another man, is there?' He didn't seem to have thought that possible. And I—I was simply clutching at straws—I told him 'Yes.' It was a lie, you know—the first deliberate lie I think I have ever told since I came to years of discretion. There isn't another man, or likely to be. That's just the trouble. If there were, my mother wouldn't be so angry with me for refusing this chance of marriage, brilliant though she thinks it. But I was quite desperate. Do you think it was very wrong of me?"

"No," said Rivington deliberately. "I don't. I lie myself—when necessary."

"He was furious," she said. "He swore that no other man should stand in his way. And then—I don't know how it was; perhaps I wasn't very convincing—he began to suspect that I had lied. That drove me into a corner. I didn't know what to say or do. And then, quite suddenly, in my extremity, I thought of you. I really don't know what made me. I didn't so much as know if you were in town. And in a flash I thought of sending that announcement to the

paper. That would convince him if nothing else would, and it would mean at least a temporary respite. It was a mad thing to do, I know. But I thought you were elderly and level-headed and a confirmed bachelor, and—and a sort of cousin as well——"

"To the tenth degree," murmured Rivington.

"So I told him," she hurried on, unheeding, "that we were engaged, and it was just going to be announced. When he heard that, he lost his head. I really think he was mad for the moment. He sprang straight at me like a wild beast, and I—I simply turned and fled. I'm pretty nimble, you know, when—when there are mad bulls about." Her quick smile flashed across her face and was gone. "That's all," she said. "I tore up to my room, and scribbled that paragraph straight away. I dared not wait for anything. And then I wrote to you. You had my letter with the paper this morning."

"Yes, I had them," Rivington spoke absently. She had a feeling that his eyes were fixed upon her without seeing her. "So that's all, is it?" he said slowly.

Again nervously her hands moved beneath his.

"I've been very headlong and idiotic," she said impulsively. "I've put you in an intolerable position. You must write at once and contradict it in the next issue."

"Do you mind not talking nonsense for a minute?" he said mildly. "I shall see my way directly."

She dropped into instant silence, sitting tense and mute, scarcely even breathing, while the pale blue eyes opposite remained steadily and unblinkingly fixed upon her face.

After a few moments he spoke.

"When does your mother return?"

"To-morrow morning." She hesitated for a second; then, "Of course she will be furious," she said. "You won't be able to argue with her. No one can."

Rivington's eyes looked faintly quizzical.

"I don't propose to try," he said. "She is, as I well know, an adept in the gentle art of snubbing. And I am no match for her there. She has, moreover, a

"Yes, you are. It's atrocious to be put in my place by a chit like you. I won't put up with it." He frowned at her ferociously. "You weren't above asking my help, but if you are above taking it—I've done with you."

"Oh, not really!" she pleaded. "It was foolish of me, I admit, because you really are one of the family. Please don't scowl so. It doesn't suit your style of beauty in the least, and I am sure you wouldn't like to spoil a good impression."

But he continued to frown uncompromisingly, till she stretched out a conciliatory hand to him across the table.

"Don't be cross, Knight Errant! I know you are only pretending."

"Then don't do it again," he said, relaxing, and pinching her fingers somewhat heartlessly. "I'm horribly sensitive on some points. As I was saying, it won't hurt you very badly to live on nothing for a bit, even if you are a lady of extravagant tastes."

"Oh, but I can work," she said eagerly. "I can change my name, and go into a shop."

"Of course," he said, mildly sarcastic. "You will doubtless find your vocation sooner or later. But that is not the present point. Now, listen! In the county of Hampshire is a little place called Weatherbroom—quite a little place, just a hamlet and a post office. Just out of the hamlet is a mill with a few acres of farmland attached. It's awfully picturesque—a regular artist's place. By the way, are you an artist?"

"Oh, no. I sketch a little, but —"

"That'll do. You are not an artist, but you sketch. Then you won't be quite stranded. It's very quiet, you know. There's no society. Only the miller and his wife, and now and then the landlord—an out-at-elbows loafer who drifts about town and, very occasionally, plays knight errant to ladies in distress. There isn't even a curate. Can you possibly endure it?"

She raised her head and laughed—a sweet, spontaneous laugh, inexpressibly gay.

"Oh, you are good—just good! It's the only word

that describes you. I always felt you were. I didn't know you were a landed proprietor, though."

"In a very small way," he assured her.

"How nice!" she said eagerly. "Yes, I'll go. I shall love it. But"—her face falling—"what of you? Shall you stay in town?"

"And face the music," said the Poor Relation, with his most benign smile. "That is my intention. Don't pity me! I shall enjoy it."

"Is it possible?" Again she looked doubtful.

"Of course it's possible. I enjoy a good row now and then. It keeps me in condition. I'll come down and see you some day, and tell you all about it." He glanced at his watch. "I think we ought to be moving. We will discuss arrangements as we go. I must send a wire to Mrs. Perkiss, and tell her you will go down by the seven thirty. I will see you into the train at this end, and they will meet you at the other with the cart. It's three miles from the railway."

As they passed out together, he added meditatively, "I think you'll like the old mill, Chirpy. It's thatched."

"I'm sure I shall," she answered earnestly.

V

THE KNIGHT ERRANT TAKES THE FIELD

Rivington returned to his rooms that night, after dining at a restaurant, with a pleasing sense of having accomplished something that had been well worth the doing. He chuckled to himself a little as he walked. It was a decidedly humorous situation.

He was met at the top of the stairs by his servant, a sharp-faced lad of fifteen whom he had picked out of the dock of a police-court some months before, and who was devoted to him in consequence.

"There's a gentleman waitin' for you, sir; wouldn't take 'No' for an answer; been 'ere best part of an hour. Name of Sin, sir. Looks like a foreigner."

"Eh?" The blue eyes widened for a moment, then

smiled approbation. "Very appropriate," murmured Rivington. "All right, Tommy; I know the gentleman."

He was still smiling as he entered his room.

A slim, dark man turned swiftly from its farther end to meet him. He had obviously been prowling up and down.

"Mr. Rivington?" he said interrogatively.

Rivington bowed.

"Mr. Dinghra Singh?" he returned.

"Have you seen me before?"

"At a distance—several times."

"Ah!" The Indian drew himself up with a certain arrogance, but his narrow black moustache did not hide the fact that his lips were twitching with excitement. His dark eyes shone like the eyes of a beast, green and ominous. "But we have never spoken. I thought not. Now, Mr. Rivington, will you permit me to come at once to business?"

He spoke without a trace of foreign accent. He stood in the middle of the room, facing Rivington, in a commanding attitude.

Rivington took a seat on the edge of the table. He was still faintly smiling.

"Go ahead, sir," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

But Dinghra preferred to stand.

"I am presuming that you are the Mr. Cecil Mordaunt Rivington whose engagement to Miss Ernestine Cardwell was announced in this morning's paper," he said, speaking quickly but very distinctly.

"The same," said Rivington. He added with a shrug of the shoulders, "A somewhat high sounding name for such a humble citizen as myself, but it was not of my own choosing."

Dinghra ignored the remark. He was very plainly in no mood for trivialities.

"And the engagement really exists?" he questioned.

The Englishman's brows went up.

"Of course it exists."

"Ah!" It was like a snarl. The white teeth gleamed for a moment. "I had no idea," Dinghra

said, still with the same feverish rapidity, "that I had a rival."

"Are we rivals?" said Rivington, amiably regretful. "It's the first I have heard of it."

"You must have known!" The green glare suddenly began to thicken with a ruddy tinge as of flame. "Every one knew that I was after her."

"Oh yes, I knew that," said Rivington. "But—pardon me if I fail to see that that fact constitutes any rivalry between us. We were engaged long before she met you. We have been engaged for years."

"For years!" Dinghra took a sudden step forward. He looked as if he were about to spring at the Englishman's throat.

But Rivington remained quite unmoved, all unsuspecting, lounging on the edge of the table.

"Yes, for years," he repeated. "But we have kept it to ourselves till now. Even Lady Florence had no notion of it. There was nothing to be gained by talking. It was a case of——" He dug his hands into his trousers pockets and pulled them inside out with an eloquent gesture. "So, of course, there was nothing for it but to wait."

"Then why have you published the engagement now?" demanded Dinghra.

Rivington smiled.

"Because we are tired of waiting," he said.

"You are in a position to marry, then? You are——"

"I am as poor as a church mouse, if you want to know," said Rivington.

"And you will marry on nothing?"

"I dare say we shan't starve," said Rivington optimistically.

"Ah!" Again that beast-like snarl. There was no green glare left in the watching eyes—only red, leaping flame. "And—you like poverty?" asked the Indian in the tone of one seeking information.

"I detest it," said Rivington, with unusual energy.

Dinghra drew a step nearer, noiselessly, like a cat. His lips began to smile. He could not have been aware of the tigerish ferocity of his eyes.

"I should like to make a bargain with you, Mr. Rivington," he said.

Rivington, his hands in his pockets, looked him over with a cool, appraising eye. He said nothing at all.

"This girl," said Dinghra, his voice suddenly very soft and persuasive, "she is worth a good deal to you—doubtless?"

"Doubtless," said Rivington.

"She is worth—what?"

Rivington stared uncomprehendingly.

With a slight, contemptuous gesture the Indian proceeded to explain.

"She is worth a good deal to me too—more than you would think. Her mother also desires a marriage between us. I am asking you, Mr. Rivington, to give her up, and to—name your price."

"The devil you are!" said Rivington; but he said it without violence. He still sat motionless, his hands in his pockets, surveying his visitor.

"I am rich," Dinghra said, still in those purring accents. "I am prepared to make you a wealthy man for the rest of your life. You will be able to marry, if you desire to do so, and live in ease and luxury. Come, Mr. Rivington, what do you say to it? You detest poverty. Now is your chance, then. You need never be poor again."

"You're uncommonly generous," said Rivington. "But is the lady to have no say in the matter? Or has she already spoken?"

Dinghra looked supremely contemptuous.

"The matter is entirely between you and me," he said.

"Oh!" Rivington became reflective.

The Indian crossed his arms and waited.

"Well," Rivington said at length, "I will name my price, since you desire it, but I warn you it's a fairly stiff one. You won't like it."

"Speak!" said Dinghra eagerly. His eyes literally blazed at the Englishman's unperturbable face.

Slowly Rivington took his hands from his pockets.

Slowly he rose. For a moment he seemed to tower almost threateningly over the lesser man, then carelessly he slumped his limbs to relax.

"The price," he said, "is that you come to me every day for a fortnight for as sound a licking as I am in a condition to administer. I will release Miss Ernestine Cardwell for that, and that alone." He paused. "And I think at the end of my treatment that you will stand a considerably better chance of winning her favour than you do at present," he added, faintly smiling.

An awful silence followed his words. Dinghra stood as though transfixed for the space of twenty seconds. Then, without word or warning of any sort, with a single spring inexpressibly bestial, he leapt at Rivington's throat.

But Rivington was ready for him. With incredible swiftness he stooped and caught his assailant as he sprang. There followed a brief and furious struggle, and then the Indian found himself slowly but irresistibly forced backwards across the Englishman's knee. He had a vision of pale blue eyes that were too grimly ironical to be angry, and the next moment he was sitting on the floor, two muscular hands holding him down.

"Not to-night," said the leisurely voice above him. "To-morrow, if you like, we will begin the cure. Go home now and think it over."

And with that he was free. But he sat for a second too infuriated to speak or move. Then, like lightning, he was on his feet.

They stood face to face for an interval that was too pregnant with fierce mental strife to be timed by seconds. Then, with clenched hands, in utter silence, Dinghra turned away. He went softly, with a gliding, beast-like motion to the door, paused an instant, looked back with the gleaming eyes of a devil—and was gone.

The Poor Relation threw himself into a chair and laughed very softly, his lower lip gripped fast between his teeth.

VI

THE KNIGHT ERRANT'S STRATEGY

It was summer in Weatherbroom—the glareless, perfect summer of the country, of trees in their first verdure, of seas of bracken all in freshest green, of shining golden gorse, of babbling, clear brown streams, of birds that sang and chattered all day long.

And in the midst of this paradise Ernestine Cardwell dwelt secure. There was literally not a soul to speak to besides the miller and his wife, but this absence of human companionship had not begun to pull upon her. She was completely and serenely happy.

She spent the greater part of her days wandering about the woods and commons with a book tucked under her arm which she seldom opened. Now and then she tried to sketch, but usually abandoned the attempt in a fit of impatience. How could she hope to reproduce, even faintly, the loveliness around her? It seemed presumption almost to try, and she revelled in idleness instead. The singing of the birds had somehow got into her heart. She could listen to that music for hours together.

Or else she would wander along the mill stream with the roar of the racing water behind her, and gather great handfuls of the wild flowers that fringed its banks. These were usually her evening strolls, and she loved none better.

Once, exploring around the mill, she entered a barn, and found there an old caravan that once had been gaily painted and now stood in all the shabbiness of departed glory. She had the curiosity to investigate its interior, and found there a miniature bedroom neatly furnished.

"That's Mr. Rivington's," the miller's wife told her. "He will often run down to fish in the summer, and then he likes it pulled out into the bit of wood yonder by the water, and spends the night there. It's a funny fancy, I often think."

"I should love it," said Ernestine.

She wrote to Rivington that night, her second letter since her arrival, and told him of her discovery. She added, "When are you coming down again? There are plenty of trout in the stream." And she posted the letter herself at the little thatched post office, with a small, strictly private smile. Oh, no, she wasn't bored, of course! But it would be rather fun if he came.

On the evening of the following day she was returning from her customary stroll along the stream, when she spied a water lily, yellow and splendid, floating, as is the invariable custom of these flowers, just out of reach from the bank. She made several attempts to secure it, each failure only serving to increase her determination. Finally, the evening being still and warm, and her desire for the pretty thing not to be denied, she slipped off shoes and stockings and slid cautiously into the stream. It bubbled deliciously round her ankles, sending exquisite cold thrills through and through her. She secured her prize, and gave herself up unreservedly to the enjoyment thereof.

An unmistakable whiff of tobacco-smoke awoke her from her dream of delight. She turned swiftly, the lily in one hand, her skirt clutched in the other.

"Don't be alarmed," said a quiet, casual voice. "It's only me."

"Only you!" she echoed, blushing crimson. "I wasn't expecting anyone just now."

"Oh, but I don't count," he said. He was standing on the bank above her, looking down upon her with eyes so kindly that she found it impossible to be vexed with him, or even embarrassed after that first moment.

She reached up her hand to him.

"I'm coming out."

He took the small wrist, and helped her ashore. She looked up at him and laughed.

"I'm glad you've come," she said simply.

"Thank you," he returned, equally simply. "How are you getting on?"

"Oh, beautifully! I'm as happy as the day is long."

She began to rub her bare feet in the grass.

"Have my handkerchief," he suggested.

She accepted it with a smile, and sat down.

"Tell me about everything," she said.

Rivington sat down also, and took a long, luxurious pull at the briar pipe.

"Things were quite lively for a day or two after you left," he said. "But they have settled down again. Still, I don't advise you to go back again at present."

"Oh, I'm not going," she said. "I am much happier here. I saw a squirrel this morning. I wanted to kiss it dreadfully, but," with a sigh, "it didn't understand."

"The squirrel's loss," observed Rivington.

She crumpled his handkerchief into a ball, and tossed it at him.

"Of course. But as it will never know what it has missed, it doesn't so much matter. Are you going to live in the caravan? I'll bring you your supper if you are."

"That's awfully good of you," he said.

"Oh, no, it isn't. I want to. I shall bring my own as well and eat it on the step."

"Better and better!" said Rivington.

She laughed her own peculiarly light-hearted laugh.

"I've a good mind to turn you out and sleep there myself. I'm longing to know what it feels like."

"You can if you want to," he said.

She shook her head.

"I daren't, by myself."

"I'll have my kennel underneath," he suggested.

But she shook her head again, though she still laughed.

"No, I mustn't. What would Mrs. Petliss say? She has a very high opinion of me at present."

"Who hasn't?" said Rivington.

She raised her eyes suddenly and gave him a straight, serious look.

"Are you trying to be complimentary, Knight Errant? Because—don't!"

Rivington blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"Shouldn't dream of it," he said imperturbably.

"I am fully aware that poor relations mustn't presume on their privileges."

She coloured a little, and gave her whole attention to fastening her shoes lace.

"I didn't mean that," she said, after a moment. "Only—don't think I care for that sort of thing, for, candidly, I don't."

"You needn't be afraid," he answered gravely. "I shall never say anything to you that I don't mean."

She glanced up again with her quick smile.

"Is it a bargain?" she said.

He held out his hand to her.

"All right, Chipwy, a bargain," he said.

And they sealed it with a warm grip of mutual appreciation.

"Now tell me what everybody has been saying about me," she said, getting to her feet.

He smiled as he busily arose.

"To begin with," he said, "I've seen Mamma."

She looked up at him sharply.

"Go on! Wasn't she furious?"

"My dear child, that is but a mild term. She was cold as the nether mill-stone. I am afraid there isn't much chance for us if we persist in our folly."

"Don't be absurd! Tell me everything. Has that announcement been contradicted?"

"Once," said Rivington. "But it has been inserted three times since then."

"Oh, but you didn't——"

"Yes, but I did. It was necessary. I think every one is now convinced of our engagement, including Lady Florence."

Kismetine laughed a little, in spite of herself.

"I can't think what the end of it will be," she said, with a touch of uneasiness.

"Wait till we get there," said Rivington.

She threw him a glance, half merry and half shy.

"Did you tell mother where I was?"

"On the contrary," said Rivington, "I implored her to tell me."

She drew a sharp breath.

"That was very ingenious of you."

"So I thought," he rejoined modestly.

"And what did she say?"

"She said with scarcely a pause that she had sent you out of town to give you time to come to your senses, and it was quite futile for me to question her, as she had not the faintest intention of revealing your whereabouts."

Ernestine breathed again.

"I said in the note I left behind for her that she wasn't to worry about me. I had gone into the country to get away from my troubles."

"That was ingenious, too," he commented. "I think, if you ask me, that we have come out of the affair rather well."

"We have all been remarkably subtle," she said, with a sigh. "But I don't like subtlety, you know. It's very horrid, and it frightens me rather."

"What are you afraid of?" he said.

"I don't know. I think I am afraid of going too far and not being able to get back."

"Do you want to get back?" he asked.

"No, no, of course not. At least, not yet," she assured him.

"Then, my dear," he said, "I think if you will allow me to say so, that you are disquieting yourself in vain."

He spoke very kindly, with a gentleness that was infinitely reassuring.

With an impulsive movement of complete confidence, she slipped her hand through his arm.

"Thank you, Knight Errant," she said. "I wanted that."

She did not ask him anything about Dinghra, and he wondered a little at her forbearance.

VII

HIS INSPIRATION

The days of Rivington's sojourn slipped by with exceeding smoothness. They did a little fishing and a

good deal of quiet lazing, a little exploring, and even one or two long, all-day rambles.

And then one day, to Ernestine's amazement, Rivington took her sketching-block from her and began to sketch. He worked rapidly and quite silently for about an hour, smoking furiously the while, and finally laid before her the completed sketch.

She stared at it in astonishment.

"I had no idea you were a genius. Why, it's lovely!"

He smiled a little.

"I did it for a living once, before my father died and left me enough to buy me bread and cheese. I became a baker then, and I've been one ever since."

"But what a pity!" she exclaimed.

His smile faded.

"It is, isn't it? But where's the sense of working when you've nothing to work for? No, it isn't the work of a genius. It's the work of a man who might do something good if he had the incentive for it, but not otherwise."

"What a pity!" she said again. "Why don't you take to it again?"

"I might," he said, "if I found it worth while."

He tapped the ashes from his pipe and settled himself at full length.

"Surely it is worth while!" she protested. "Why, you might make quite a lot of money."

Rivington stuck the empty pipe between his teeth and pulled at it absently.

"I'm not particularly keen on money," he said.

"But it's such a waste," she argued. "Oh, I wish I had your talent. I would never let it lie idle."

"It isn't my fault," he said; "I am waiting for an inspiration."

"What do you mean by an inspiration?"

He turned lazily upon his side and looked at her.

"Let us say, for instance, if some nice little woman ever cared to marry me," he said.

There fell a sudden silence. Ernestine was studying his sketch with her head on one side.

At length, "You will never marry," she said, in a tone of conviction.

"Probably not," agreed Rivington.

He lay still for a few seconds, then sat up slowly and removed his pipe to peer over her shoulder.

"It isn't bad," he said critically.

She flashed him a sudden smile.

"Do take it up again!" she pleaded. "It's really wicked of you to go and bury a talent like that."

He shook his head.

"I can't sketch just to please myself. It isn't in me."

"Do it to please me, then," she said impulsively.

He smiled into her eyes.

"Would it please you, Chirpy?"

Her eyes met his with absolute candour.

"Immensely," she said. "Immensely! You know it would."

He held out his hand for the sketch.

"All right, then. You shall be my inspiration."

She laughed lightly.

"Till that nice little woman turns up."

"Exactly," said Rivington.

He continued to hold out his hand, but she withheld the sketch.

"I'm going to keep it, if you don't mind."

"What for?" he said.

"Because I like it. I want it. Why shouldn't I?"

"I will do you something better worth having than that," he said.

"Something I shouldn't like half so well," she returned. "No, I'm going to keep this, in memory of a perfect afternoon and some of the happiest days of my life."

Rivington gave in, still smiling.

"I'm going back to town to-morrow," he said.

"Oh, are you?" Actual dismay sounded in her voice. "Why?"

"I'm afraid I must," he said. "I'm sorry. Shall you be lonely?"

"Oh, no," she rejoined briskly. "Of course not. I wasn't lonely before you came." She added rather wistfully, "It was good of you to stay so long: I hope you haven't been very bored?"

"Not a bit," said Rivington. "I've only been afraid of boring you."

She laughed a little. A certain constraint seemed to have fallen upon her.

"How horribly polite we are getting!" she said.

He laid his hand for an instant on her shoulder.

"I shall come again, Chirpy," he said.

She nodded carelessly, not looking at him.

"Yes, mind you do. I dare say I shan't be having any other visitors at present."

But though her manner was perfectly friendly, Rivington was conscious of that unwonted constraint during the rest of his visit. He even fancied on the morrow that she bade him farewell with relief.

VIII

THE MEETING IN THE MARKET-PLACE

Two days later, Ernestine drove with the miller's wife to market at Rington, five miles distant. She had never seen a country market, and her interest was keen. They started after an early breakfast on an exquisite summer morning. And Ernestine carried with her a letter which she had that day received from Rivington.

"Dear Chirpy," it ran, "I hasten to write and tell you that now I am back in town again I am most hideously bored. I am, however, negotiating for a studio, which fact ought to earn for me your valued approval. If, for any reason, my presence should seem desirable to you, write or wire, and I shall come immediately. Your devoted

"KNIGHT ERRANT."

Ernestine squeezed this letter a good many times on the way to Rington. She had certainly been feeling somewhat forlorn since his departure. But, this fact notwithstanding, she had no intention of writing or writing to him at present. Still, it was nice to know he would come.

They reached the old country town, and found it crammed with market folk. The whole place hummed with people. Ernestine's first view of the market-place filled her with amazement. The lowing of cattle, the bleating of sheep, and the yelling of men combined to make such a confusion of sound that she felt bewildered, even awestruck.

Mrs. Perkiss went straight to the oldest inn in the place and put up the cart. She was there to buy, not to sell.

Ernestine kept with her for the first hour, then, growing weary of the hubbub, wandered away from the market to explore the old town. She sat for a while in the churchyard, and there, to enliven her solitude, re-read that letter of Rivington's. Was he really taking up art again to please her? He had been very energetic. She wondered, smiling, how long his energy would last.

Thus engaged the time passed quickly, and she presently awoke from a deep reverie to find that the hour Mrs. Perkiss had appointed for lunch at the inn was approaching. She rose, and began to make her way thither.

The street was crowded, and her progress was slow. A motor was threading its way through the throng at a snail's pace. The persistence of its horn attracted her attention. As it neared her she glanced at its occupant.

The next moment she was shrinking back into a doorway, white to the lips. The man in the car was Dinghra!

Across the crowded pavement his eyes sought hers, and the wicked triumph in them turned her cold. He made no sign of recognition, and she seemed as though petrified till the motor had slowly passed.

Then a great weakness came over her, and for a few seconds all consciousness of her surroundings went from her. She remembered only those evil eyes and the gloating satisfaction with which they had rested upon her.

"Ain't you well, miss?" said a voice.

With a start she found a burly young farmer beside her. He looked down at her with kindly concern.

"You take my arm," he said. "Which way do you want to go?"

With an effort she told him, and the next moment he was leading her rapidly through the crowd.

They reached the inn, and he put her into the bar-
acken and went out, bellowing for Mrs. Perkiss, whom
he knew.

When he finally emerged, after finding the miller's
ife, a short, dark man was waiting on the farther side
of the road. The farmer took no note of him, but the
atcher saw the farmer, and with swift, cat-like tread
e followed him.

IX

IN FEAR OF THE ENEMY

All the way home the memory of those eyes haunted
Irnestine. All the way home her ears were straining
to catch the hoot of a motor-horn and the rush of
wheels behind them.

But no motor overtook them. Nothing happened to
disturb the smiling peace of that summer afternoon.

Back in her little room under the thatch she flung
herself face downwards on the bed, and lay tense. What
should she do? What should she do? He had seen
her. He was on her track. Sooner or later he would
run her to earth. And she—what could she do?

For a long while she lay there, too horror-stricken to
move, while over and over again there passed through
her aching brain the memory of those eyes. Did he
guess that she had come there to hide from him? Had
he been hunting her for long?

She moved at length, sat up stiffly, and felt something
crackle inside her dress. With a little start she realised
what it was, and drew forth Rivington's letter.

A great sigh broke from her as she opened and read
it once again.

A little later she ran swiftly downstairs with a folded
paper in her hand. Out into the blinding sunshine,

bareheaded, she ran, never pausing till she turned into the lily-decked garden of the post office.

She was trembling all over as she handed in her message, but as it ticked away a sensation of immense relief stole over her. She went out again feeling almost calm.

But that night her terrors came back upon her in ghastly array. She could not sleep, and lay listening to every sound. Finally, she fell into an uneasy doze, from which she started to hear the dog in the yard barking furiously. She lay shivering for a while, then crept to her window and looked out. The dense shadow of a pine wood across the road blotted out the starlight, and all was very dark. It was impossible to discern anything. She stood listening intently in the darkness.

The dog subsided into a growling monotone, and through the stillness she fancied she caught a faint sound, as if some animal were prowling softly under the trees. She listened with a thumping heart. Nearer it seemed to come, and nearer, and then she heard it no more. A sudden gust stirred the pine tops, and a sudden, overwhelming panic filled her soul.

With the violence of frenzy she slammed and bolted her window, and made a wild spring back to the bed. She burrowed down under the blankets, and lay there huddled, not daring to stir for a long, long time.

With the first glimmer of day came relief, but she did not sleep. The night's terror had left her nerves too shaken for repose. Yet as the sun rose and the farmyard sounds began, as she heard the mill-wheel creak and turn and the rush and roar of the water below, common sense came to her aid, and she was able to tell herself that her night alarm might have been due to nothing more than her own startled imagination.

On the breakfast table she found a card awaiting her, which she seized, and read with deepening colour.

"Expect me by the afternoon train. I shall walk from the station.—K. E."

A feeling of gladness, so intense that it was almost rapture, made her blood flow faster. He was coming in answer to her desperate summons. He would be

with her that very day. She was sure that he would tell her what to do.

She read the card several times in the course of the morning, and came to the conclusion that it would be only nice of her to walk to meet him. The path lay through beech woods. She had gone part of the way with him only three days before. Only three days! It seemed like months. She looked forward to meeting him again as though he had been an old friend.

She started soon after the early dinner. The afternoon was hot and sultry. She was glad to turn from the road into the shade and stillness of the woods. The sun-ray slanting downwards through the mazy, golden sides made her think of the afternoon on which she had waited for him under the dome of St. Paul's.

The heat as she proceeded became intense. The humming of many insects filled the air with a persistent drone. It was summer at its height.

A heavy languor began to possess her. She remembered that she had not slept all the previous night. She also recalled the panic that had kept her awake, and smiled faintly to herself. She did not feel afraid now that Livingston was coming. She even began to think she had been rather foolish, and wondered if he would think so too.

She began to go more slowly. Her feet felt heavier at every step. A few yards ahead a golden-brown stream ran babbling through the wood. It was close to the path. She would sit down beside it and rest till he arrived.

She reached the stream, sank down upon a bed of moss, then found the heat intolerable, and began impulsively to loosen her shoes. What if he did discover her a second time barefooted? He had not minded before; neither had she. And no one else would come that way. He had even lent her his handkerchief to dry her feet. Perhaps he would again.

Once more a strictly private little smile twitched the corners of her mouth. She slipped off her stockings and plunged her tired feet into the cool, running water.

Leaning back against a tree-trunk she closed her eyes.

An exquisite sense of well-being stole over her. He would not be here yet. What did it matter if she dozed? The bubbling of the water lulled her. She rested her feet upon a sunny brown stone. She turned her cheek upon her arm.

And in her sleep she heard the thudding of a horse's hoofs, and dreamed that her knight errant was close at hand.

X

THE TIGER'S PREY

With a start she opened her eyes. Some one was drawing near. It must be later than she had thought.

Again she heard the tramp of a horse's feet, and hastily peered round the trunk of her tree. Surely he had not come on horseback! It must be a stranger. She cast a hasty glance towards her shoes, and gathered her feet under her.

A few yards away she caught sight of a horse's clean limbs moving in the checkered sunlight. Its rider—her heart gave a sudden, sickening throb and stood still. He was riding like a king, with his insolent dark face turned to the sun. She stared at him for one wild moment, then shrank against her tree. It was possible, it was possible even then, that he might pass her by without turning his eyes in her direction.

Nearer he came, and nearer yet. The path wound immediately behind the beech tree that sheltered her. He was close to her now. He had reached her. She cowered down in breathless terror in the moss, motionless as a stone. On went the horse's feet, on without a pause, slow and regular as the beat of a drum. He went by her at a walking pace. Surely he had not seen her!

She did not dare to lift her head, but it seemed to her that the sound of the thudding hoofs died very quickly away. For seconds that seemed like hours she crouched there in the afternoon stillness. Then at last—at last—she ventured to raise herself—to turn and look.

And in that moment she knew the agony that pierces every nerve with a physical anguish in the face of sudden horror. Near there, close to her, was Dinghra, on foot, not six paces away, and drawing softly nearer. There was a faint smile on his face. His eyes were fixed and devilish.

With a gasp she sprang up, and the next moment was running wildly away, down the forest path, heedless of the rough ground, of the stones and roots that tore her bare feet, running like a mad creature, with sobbing breath, and limbs that staggered, compel them though she might.

She did not run far. Her flight ended as suddenly as it had begun in a violent, headlong fall. A long streamer of bramble had tripped her unaccustomed feet. She was conscious for an instant of the horrible pain of it as she was flung forward on her hands.

And then came the touch that she dreaded, the sinewy hands lifting her, the sinister face looking into hers.

"You should never run away from destiny," said Dinghra softly. "Destiny can always catch you up."

She gasped and shuddered. She was shaking all over, too crushed, too shattered, for speech.

He set her on her feet.

"We will go back," he said, keeping his arm about her. "You have had a pleasant sleep? I am sorry you awoke so soon."

But she stood still, her wild eyes searching the forest depths.

"Oh, let me go!" she cried out suddenly. "Oh, do let me go!"

His arm tightened, but still he smiled.

"Never again. I have had some trouble to find you, but you are mine now for ever—or at least"—and the snarl of the beast was in his voice—"for as long as I want you."

She resisted him, striving to escape that ever-tightening arm.

"No!" she cried in an agony. "No! No! No!"

His hold became a vice-like grip. Without a word

he forced her back with him along the way she had come. She limped as she went, and he noted it with a terrible smile.

"It would have been better if you hadn't run away," he said.

"Oh, do let me go!" she begged again through her white lips. "Why do you persecute me like this? I have never done you any harm."

"Except laugh at me," he answered. "But you will never do that again, at least."

And then, finding her weight upon him, he stopped and lifted her in his arms.

She covered her face with her hands, and he laughed above her head.

"It is a dangerous amusement," he said, "to laugh at Dinghra. There are not many who dare. There is not one who goes unpunished."

He bore her back to her resting place. He set her on her feet and drew her hands away, holding her firmly by the wrists.

"Now tell me," he said—"it is the last time I shall ever ask you—will you marry me?"

"Never!" she cried.

"Be careful!" he broke in warningly. "That is not your answer. Look at me! Look into my eyes! Do you think you are wise in giving me such an answer as that?"

But she would not meet his eyes. She dared not.

"Listen!" he said. "Your mother has given you to me. She will never speak to you again, except as my promised wife. I have sworn to her that I will make you accept me. No power on earth can take you from me. Ernestine, listen! You are the only woman who ever resisted me, and for that I am going to make you what I have never desired to make any woman before—my wife—not my servant; my queen—not my slave. I can give you everything under the sun. You will be a princess. You will have wealth, jewels such as you have never dreamed of, palaces, servants, honour——"

"And you!" she cried hysterically. "You!"

"Yes, and me," he said. "But you will have me in one form or another whatever your choice. You won't get away from me. You may refuse to marry me, but —"

"I do!" she burst out wildly. "I do!"

"But —" he said again, very deliberately.

And then, compelled by she knew not what, she lifted her eyes to his. And all her life she shrank and shuddered at the dread memory of what she saw.

For seconds he did not utter a single word. For seconds his eyes held hers, arresting, piercing, devouring. She could not escape them. She was forced to meet them, albeit with fear and loathing unutterable.

"You see!" he said at last, as though concluding an argument. "You are mine! I can do with you exactly as I will—exactly as I will!" He repeated the words almost in a whisper.

But at that she cried out, and began to struggle, like a bird beating its wings against the bars of a cage.

His hold became cruel in an instant. He forced her hands behind her, holding her imprisoned in his arms. He tilted her head back. His eyes shone down into hers like the eyes of a tiger that clutches its prey. He quelled her resistance by sheer brutality.

"I have warned you!" he said; and she knew instinctively that he would have no mercy.

"How can I marry you?" she gasped in desperation. "I am engaged to—another man!"

She saw his face change. Instantly she knew that she had made a mistake. The ferocity in his eyes turned to devilish malice.

"You will marry me yet!" he said.

"But you will come to hate me some day!" she cried, clutching at straws. "As—as I hate you to-day!"

His look appalled her, his lips were close to hers.

"If I do," he said, with a fiendish smile, "I shall find a remedy. But so long as you hate me, I shall not grow tired of you!"

And with that he suddenly and savagely pressed his lips to hers.

XI

THE TIGER'S PUNISHMENT

That single kiss was to Ernestine the climax and zenith of horror. It seemed to sear and blister her very soul with an anguish of repulsion that would sear her memory for all time. She retained her consciousness, but she never knew by what lightning stroke she was set free. She was too dazed, too blinded, by her horror to realise. But suddenly the cruel grip that had her helpless was gone. A vague confusion swam before her eyes. Her knees doubled under her. She sank down in a huddled heap, and lay quivering.

There came to her the sound of struggling, the sound of cursing, the sound of blows. But, sick and spent, she heeded none of these things, till a certain monotony of sound began to drum itself into her senses. She came to full understanding to see Dinghwa, in the grip of an Englishman, being hideously thrashed with his own horsewhip. He was quite powerless in that grip, but he would fight to the end, and it seemed that the end was not far off. The punishment must have been going on for many seconds. For his face was quite livid and streaked with blood, his hands groped blindly, beating the air, he staggered at each blow.

The whip fell flail-like, with absolute precision and regularity. It spared no part of him. His coat was nearly torn off. In one place, on the shoulder, the white shirt was exposed, and this also was streaked with blood.

Ernestine crouched under the tree and watched. But very soon a new fear sprang up within her, a fear that made her collect all her strength for action. It was something in that awful, livid face that prompted her.

She struggled stiffly to her feet, later she wondered how, and drew near to the two men. The whirling whip continued to descend, but she had no fear of that.

She came quite close till she was almost under the upraised arm. She laid trembling hands upon a grey tweed coat.

"Let him go!" she said very urgently. "Let him go—while he can!"

Rivington looked down into her white face. He was white himself—white to the lips.

"I haven't done with him yet," he said, and he spoke between his teeth.

"I know," she said. "I know. But he has had enough. You mustn't kill him."

She was strangely calm, and her calmness took effect. Later, she wondered at that also.

Rivington jerked the exhausted man upright.

"Go back!" he said to Ernestine. "Go back! I won't kill him!"

She took him at his word, and went back. She heard Rivington speak briefly and sternly, and Dinghra mumble something in reply. She heard the shuffling of feet, and knew that Rivington was helping him to walk.

For a little while she watched the two figures, the one supporting the other, as they moved slowly away. Dinghra's head was sunk upon his breast. He slunk along like a beaten dog. Then the trunk of a tree hid them from her sight.

When that happened, Ernestine suffered herself to collapse upon the moss, with her head upon her arms.

Lying thus, she presently heard once more the tread of a horse's feet, and counted each footfall mechanically. They grew fainter and fainter, till at last the forest silence swallowed them, and a great solitude seemed to wrap her round.

Minutes passed. She did not stir. Her strength had gone utterly from her. Finally there came the sound of a quiet footfall.

Close to her it came, and stopped.

"Why, Chirpy!" a quiet voice said.

She tried to move, but could not. She was as one paralysed. She could not so much as utter a word.

He knelt down beside her and raised her to a sitting

posture, so that she leaned against him. Holding her so, he gently rubbed her cheek.

"Poor little Chirpy!" he said. "It's all right!"

At sound of the pity and the tenderness of his voice something seemed to break within her, the awful constriction passed. She hid her face upon his arm, and burst into a wild agony of weeping.

He laid his hand upon her head, and kept it there for a while; then as her sobbing grew more and more violent, he bent over her.

"Don't cry so, child, for Heaven's sake!" he said earnestly. "It's all right, dear; all right. You are perfectly safe!"

"I shall never—feel safe—again!" she gasped, between her sobs.

"Yes, yes, you will," he assured her. "You will have me to take care of you. I shall not leave you again."

"But the nights!" she cried wildly. "The nights!"

"Hush!" he said. "Hush! There is nothing to cry about. I will take care of you at night, too."

She began to grow a little calmer. The assurance of his manner soothed her. But for a long time she crouched there shivering, with her face hidden, while he knelt beside her and stroked her hair.

At last he moved as though to rise, but on the instant she clutched at him with both hands.

"Don't go! Don't leave me! You said you wouldn't!"

"I am not going to, Chirpy," he said. "Don't be afraid!"

But she was afraid, and continued to cling to him very tightly, though she would not raise her face.

"Come!" he said gently, at length. "You're better. Wouldn't you like to bathe your feet?"

"You will stay with me?" she whispered.

"I am going to help you down to the stream," he said.

"Don't—don't carry me!" she faltered.

"Of course not! You can walk on this moss if I hold you up."

But she was very reluctant to move.

"I—I don't want you to look at me," she said, at last, with a great sob. "I feel such a fright."

"Don't be a goose, Chirpy!" he said.

That pleased her a little. She dried her tears. She even suffered him to raise her to her feet, but she kept her head bent, avoiding his eyes.

"Look where you are going," said Rivington practically. "Here is my arm. You mustn't mind me, you know. Lean hard!"

She accepted his assistance in silence. She was trying still, though she strove to conceal the fact. But as she sank down once more on the brink of the stream, her sob broke out afresh, and would not be suppressed.

"I was so happy!" she whispered. "I didn't want you here—to spoil my paradise."

Rivington said nothing. She did not even know if he heard; and if he were aware of her tears he gave no sign. He was gently bathing her torn feet with his hands.

XII

THE KNIGHT ERRANT PLAYS THE GAME

She began to command herself at last, and to be inexpressibly ashamed of her weakness. She sat in silence, accepting his ministrations, till Rivington proceeded to tear his handkerchief into strips for bandaging purposes; then she put out a protesting hand.

"You—you shouldn't!" she said rather tremulously.

He looked at her with his kindly smile.

"It's all right, Chirpy. I've got another."

She tried to laugh. It was a valiant effort.

"I know I'm a horrid nuisance to you. It's nice of you to pretend you don't mind."

"I never pretend," said Rivington, with a touch of grimness. "Do you think you will be able to get your stocking over that?"

"I think so."

"Try!" he said.

She tried and succeeded.

"That's better," said Rivington. "Now for the shoes. I can put them on."

"I don't like you to," she murmured.

"Knights errant always do that," he assured her.

"It's part of the game. Come! That's splendid! How does it feel?"

"I think I can bear it," she said, under her breath.

He drew it instantly off again.

"No, you can't. Or, at least, you are not going to. Look here, Chirpy, my dear, I think you must let me carry you, anyhow to the caravan. It isn't far, and I can fetch you some slippers from the mill from there. What? You don't mind, do you? An old friend like me, and a poor relation into the bargain?" The blue eyes smiled at her quizzically, and very persuasively.

But her white face crimsoned, and she turned it aside.

"I don't want you to," she said pitiously.

"No, but you'll put up with it!" he urged. "It's too small a thing to argue about, and you have too much sense to refuse."

He rose with the words. She looked up at him with quivering lips.

"You wouldn't do it—if I refused?" she faltered.

The smile went out of his eyes.

"I shall never do anything against your will," he said.

"But I don't know how you will get back if I don't."

She pondered this for a moment, then, impulsively as a child, stretched up her arms to him.

"All right, Knight Errant. You may," she said.

And he bent and lifted her without further words.

They scarcely spoke during that journey. Only once, towards the end of it, Ernestine asked him if he were tired, and he scouted the idea with a laugh.

When they reached the caravan, and he set her down upon the step, she thanked him meekly.

"We will have tea," said Rivington, and proceeded to forage for the necessities for this meal in a locker inside the caravan.

He brought out a spirit lamp and boiled some water. he a final making of the tea he relegated to Ernestine.

"A woman does it better than a man," he said.

And while she was thus occupied, he produced cups and saucers, and a tin of biscuits, and laid the cloth. Finally, he seated himself on the grass below her, and began with evident enjoyment to partake with her of the meal thus provided.

When it was over he washed up, she drying the cups and saucers, and striving with somewhat doubtful success to appear normal and unconstrained.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked, at the end of his.

"Of course not," she answered, and he brought out his belated pipe forthwith.

She watched him fill and light it, her chin upon her hand. She was still very pale, and the fear had not gone wholly from her eyes.

"Now I'm going to talk to you," Rivington announced.

"Yes?" she said rather faintly.

He lay back with his arms under his head, and stared up through the beech boughs to the cloudless evening sky.

"I want you first of all to remember," he said, "that what I said a little while ago I meant—and shall mean for all time. I will never do anything, Chirpy, against your will."

He spoke deliberately. He was puffing the smoke upward in long spirals.

"That is quite understood, is it?" he asked, as she did not speak.

"I think so," said Ernestine slowly.

"I want you to be quite sure," he said. "Otherwise, what I am going to say may startle you."

"Don't frighten me!" she begged, in a whisper.

"My dear child, I shan't frighten you," he rejoined.

"You may frighten yourself. That is what I am trying to guard against."

Her laugh had a piteous quiver in it.

"You think me very young and foolish, don't you?" she said.

He sat up and looked at her.

"I think," he said, "that you stand in very serious need of some one to look after you."

She made a slight, impatient movement.

"Why go over old ground? If you really have any definite suggestion to make, why not make it?"

Rivington clasped his hands about his knees. He continued to look at her speculatively, his pipe between his teeth.

"Look here, Chirpy," he said, after a moment, "I can't help thinking that you would be better off and a good deal happier if you married."

"If I—married!" Her eyes flashed startled interrogation at him. "If I—married!" she repeated almost fiercely. "I would rather die!"

"I didn't suggest that you should marry Dinghra," he pointed out mildly. "He is not the only man in the world."

The hot colour rushed up over her face.

"He is the only one that ever wanted me," she said, in a muffled tone.

"Quite sure of that?" said Rivington.

She did not answer him. She was playing nervously with a straw that she had pulled from the floor of the caravan. Her eyes were downcast.

"What about me?" said Rivington. "Think you could put up with me as a husband?"

She shook her head in silence.

"Why not?" he said gently.

Again she shook her head.

He knelt up suddenly beside her, discarding his pipe, and laid his hand on hers.

"Tell me why not," he said.

A little tremor went through her at his touch. She did not raise her eyes.

"It wouldn't do," she said, her voice very low.

"You don't like me?" he questioned.

"Yes; I like you. It isn't that."

"Then—what is it, Chirpy? I believe you are afraid of me," he said half quizzically.

"I'm not!" she declared, with vehemence. "I'm

at such a donkey! No, Knight Errant, I'm only afraid of you."

"I don't quite grasp your meaning," he said. With an effort she explained.

"You see, you don't know me very well—not nearly so well as I know you."

"I know you well enough to be fond of you, Chirpy," he said.

"That is just because you don't know me," she said, her voice quivering a little. "You wouldn't like me for long, Knight Errant. Men never do."

"More fools they," said the Knight Errant, with somewhat unusual emphasis. "It's their loss anyway." She laughed a little.

"It's very nice of you to say so, but it doesn't alter the fact. Besides——" She paused.

"Besides——" said Rivington.

She looked at him suddenly.

"What about that nice little woman who may turn up some day?"

The humorous corner of Rivington's mouth went up.

"I think she has, Chirpy," he said. "To tell you the honest truth, I've been thinking so for some time."

"You really want to marry me?" Ernestine looked him straight in the eyes. "It isn't—only—a chivalrous impulse?"

He met her look quite steadily.

"No," he said quietly; "it isn't—only—that."

Her eyes fell away from his.

"I haven't any money, you know," she said.

"Never mind about the money," he answered cheerily. "I have a little, enough to keep us from starvation. I can make more. It will do me good to work. It's settled then? You'll have me?"

"If—if you are sure——" she faltered. Then impulsively, "Oh, it's hateful to feel that I've thrown myself at your head!"

His hand closed upon hers with a restraining pressure.

"You mustn't say those things to me, Chirpy," he said quietly; "they hurt me. Now let me tell you my plans. Do you know what I did when I got back to

town the other day? I went and bought a special marriage licence. You see, I wanted to marry you even then, and I hoped that before very long I should persuade you to have me. As soon as I got your telegram, I went off and purchased a wedding-ring. I hope it will fit. But, anyhow, it will serve our present purpose. Will you drive with me into Rivington to-morrow and marry me there?"

She was listening to him in wide-eyed amazement.

"So soon?" she said.

"I thought it would save any further trouble," he answered. "But it is for you to decide."

"And—and what should we do afterwards?" she asked, stooping to pick up her straw that had fallen to the ground.

"That, again, would be for you to decide," he answered. "I would take you straight back to your mother if you wished."

She gave a muffled laugh.

"Of course I shouldn't want you to do that."

"Or," proceeded Rivington, "I would hire an animal to draw the caravan, and we would go for a holiday in the forest. Would it bore you?"

"I don't think so," she said, without looking at him. "I—I could sketch, you know, and you could paint."

"To be sure," he said. "Shall we do that, then?"

She began to split the straw with minute care.

"You think there is no danger of—Dinghra?" she said, after a moment.

Rivington smiled grimly, and got to his feet. "Not the smallest," he said.

"He might come back," she persisted. "What if—what if he tried to murder you?"

Rivington was coaxing his pipe back to life. He accomplished his object before he replied. Then:

"You need not have the faintest fear of that," he said. "Dinghra has had the advantage of a public-school education. He has doubtless been thrashed before."

"He is vindictive," she objected.

"He may be, but he is shrewd enough to know when

e game is up. Frankly, Chirpy, I don't think the aspect of pestering you, or even of punishing me, will deter him to take the field again after we are married. " she smiled down at her—" I think I have cooled ardour too effectually for that."

she shuddered.

" I shall never forget it."

He patted her shoulder reassuringly.

" I think you will, Chirpy. Or at least you will place in the same category as the bull incident. You will rest the night, and remember only with kindness the night Errant who had the good fortune to pull you round."

she reached up and squeezed his hand, still without looking at him.

" I shall always do that," she said softly.

" Then that's settled," said Rivington in a tone of quiet satisfaction.

XIII

THE KNIGHT ERRANT VICTORIOUS

" On the 21st of June, quite privately, at the Parish church, Rington, Hampshire, by the Vicar of the Parish, Cecil Mordaunt Rivington to Ernestine, fourth daughter of Lady Florence Cardwell."

Cecil Mordaunt Rivington, with his pipe occupying one corner of his mouth, and the other cocked at a distinctly humorous angle, sat on the step of a caravan in the evening of the day succeeding that of his marriage, and read the announcement thereof in the paper which he had just fetched from the post office.

There was considerable complacency in his attitude. A cheerful fire of sticks burned near, over which a tripod supported a black pot.

The sunset light filtered golden through the forest. It was growing late.

Suddenly he turned and called over his shoulder, " I say, Chirpy ! "

Ernestine's voice answered from the farther end of the caravan that was shut off from the rest by curtains.

"I'm just coming. What is it? Is the pot all right?"

"Splendid. Be quick! I've something to show you."

The curtains parted, and Ernestine came daintily forth.

Rivington barely glanced at her. He was too intent upon the paper in his hand. She stepped behind him, and bent to read the paragraph he pointed out.

After a pause, he turned to view his client, and on the instant his eyebrows went up in amazement.

"Hullo!" he said.

She was dressed like a gipsy in every detail, even to the scarlet kerchief on her head. She drew back a little, colouring under his scrutiny.

"I hope you approve," she said.

"By Jove, you look ripping!" said Rivington. "How in the world did you do it?"

"I made Mrs. Perkins help me. We managed it between us. It was just a fancy of mine to fill the idle hours. I didn't think I should ever have the courage to wear it."

He reached up his hand to her as he sat.

"My dear, you make a charming gipsy," he said. "You will have to sit for me."

She laughed, touched his hand with a hint of shyness and stepped down beside him.

"How is the supper getting on? Have you looked at it?"

He laid aside his paper to prepare for the meal. To her evident relief he made no further comment at the moment upon her appearance. But when supper was over and he was smoking his evening pipe, his eyes dwelt upon her continually as she ditted to and fro, having declined his assistance, and set everything in order after the meal.

The sun had disappeared, and a deep dusk was falling upon the forest. Ernestine moved, elf-like, in the light of the sinking fire. She took no notice of the man

who watched her, being plainly too busy to heed his attention.

But her duties were over at last, and she turned from the ruddy firelight and moved, half reluctantly it seemed, towards him. She reached him, and stood before him.

"I've done now," she said. "You can rake out the fire. Good night!"

He took the little hand in his.

"Are you tired, Chirpy?"

"No, I don't think so." She sounded slightly doubtful.

"Won't you stay with me for a little?" he said. She stood silent. "I was horribly lonely after you went to bed last night," he urged gently.

She uttered a funny little sigh.

"I'm sure you must have been horribly uncomfortable too," she said. "Did you lie awake?"

"No, I wasn't uncomfortable. I've slept in the open heaps of times before. I was just--lonely."

She laid her hand lightly on his shoulder as she stood beside him.

"It was rather awesome," she admitted.

"I believe you were lonely too," he said.

She laughed a little, and said nothing.

He took his pipe from his mouth and laid it tenderly upon the ground.

"Shall I tell you something, Chirpy?"

Her hand began to rub up and down uneasily on his shoulder.

"Well?" she said under her breath.

He looked up at her in the falling darkness.

"I feel exactly as you felt over that squirrel," he said.

"Do you remember? You wanted to kiss it, but the little fool didn't understand."

A slight quiver went through Ernestine. Again, rather breathlessly, she laughed.

"Some little fools don't," she said.

He moved and very gently slipped his arm about her.

"I didn't mean to put it quite like that," he said.

"You will pardon my clumsiness, won't you?"

She did not resist his arm, but neither did she yield to it. Her hand still adgedged upon his shoulder.

"I wish you wouldn't be so horribly nice to me," she said suddenly.

"My dear Chirpy!"

"Yes," she said with vehemence. "Why don't you take what you want?—I—I should respect you then."

"But I want you to love me," he answered quietly.

She drew a quick breath, and became suddenly quite rigid, intensely still.

His arm grew a little closer about her.

"Don't you know I am in love with you, Chirpy?" he asked her very softly. "Am I such a dumberhead that I haven't made that plain?"

"Are you?" she said, a sharp catch in her voice. "Are you?" Abruptly he stooped to him. "Knight Errant," she said, and the words fell swift and passionate, "would you have really wanted to marry me—anyway?"

His face was upturned to hers. He could feel her breathing, sharp and short, upon his lips.

"My dear," he said, "I have wanted to marry you ever since that afternoon you met me in St. Paul's."

He would have risen with the words, but she made a quick movement downwards to prevent him, and suddenly she was on her knees before him with her arms about his neck.

"Oh, I'm so glad you told me," she whispered tremulously. "I'm so glad."

He gathered her closely to him. His lips were against her forehead.

"It makes all the difference, dear, does it?"

"Yes," she whispered back, clinging faster. "Just all the difference in the world, because—because it was that afternoon—I began—to want—you too."

And there in the darkness, with the dim fofest all about them, she turned her lips to meet her husband's first kiss.

A QUESTION OF TRUST

I

PIERRE DUMARESQ stood gazing out to the hard blue line of the horizon with a frown between his brows. The glare upon the water was intense, but he stared into it with fixed, unflinching eyes, unconscious of discomfort.

He held a supple riding-switch in his hands, at which his fingers strained and twisted continually, as though somewhere in the inner man there burned a fierce impatience. But his dark face was as immovable as though it had been carved in bronze. A tropical sun had made him even darker than Nature had intended him to be, a fact to which those fixed eyes testified, for they shone like steel in the sunlight, in curious contrast to his swarthy skin. His hair was black, cropped close about a bullet head, which was set on his broad shoulders with an arrogance that gave him a peculiarly aggressive air. The narrow black moustache he wore emphasised rather than concealed the thin straight line of mouth. Plainly a fighting man this, and one, moreover, accustomed to hold his own.

At the striking of a clock in the room behind him he turned as though a voice had spoken, and left the stone balcony on which he had been waiting. His spurs rang as he stepped into the room behind it. The floor was uncarpeted, and shone like ebony.

He glanced around him as one unfamiliar with his surroundings. It was a large apartment, and lofty, but it contained very little furniture—a couch, two or three

chairs, a writing-table ; on the walls, several strangely-shaped weapons ; on the mantelpiece a couple of foils.

He smiled as his look fell upon these, and, crossing the room, he took one of them up, and tested it between his hands.

At the quiet opening of the door he wheeled, still holding it. A woman stood a moment upon the threshold ; then slowly entered. She was little more than a girl, but the cold dignity of her demeanour imparted to her the severity of more advanced years. Her face was like marble, white, pure, immobile ; but there was a touch of pathos about the eyes. They were deeply shadowed, and looked as if they had watched—or wept—for many hours.

Dumaresq bowed in the brief English fashion, instantly straightening himself with a squaring of his broad shoulders that were already so immensely square that they made his height seem inconsiderable.

She gravely inclined her head in response. She did not invite him to sit down, and he remained where he was, with his fierce eyes unwaveringly upon her.

In the middle of the room, full three yards from him, she paused, and deliberately met his scrutiny.

"You wished to see me, Monsieur Dumaresq?" she said in English.

"Yes," said Dumaresq. He turned, and laid the foil back upon the mantelpiece behind him, then calmly crossed the intervening space, and stood before her. "I am grateful to you for granting me an interview, mademoiselle," he said. "I am aware that you have done so against your will."

There was something of a challenge in the words, but she did not seem to hear it. She made answer in a slow, quiet voice that held neither antagonism nor friendliness.

"I supposed that you had some suggestion to make, monsieur, which it was my duty to hear."

"I see," said Dumaresq, still narrowly observing her. "Well, you are right. I have a suggestion to make, one which I beg, for your own sake, that you will cordially consider."

Before the almost brutal directness of his look her

own eyes slowly sank. A very faint tinge of colour crept over her pallor, but she made no sign of flinching.

"What is your suggestion, monsieur?" she quietly asked him.

He did not instantly reply. Perhaps he had not altogether expected the calm question. She showed no impatience, but she would not again meet his eyes. In silence she waited.

At length abruptly he began to speak.

"Have you," he asked, "given any thought to your position here? Have you made any plans for yourself in the event of a rising?"

Her eyelids quivered a little, but she did not raise them.

"I do not think," she said, her voice very low, "that the time has yet come for making plans."

Dumaresq threw back his head with a movement that seemed to indicate either impatience or surprise.

"You are living on the edge of a volcano," he told her, with grim force; "and at any moment you may be overwhelmed. Have you never faced that yet? Haven't you yet begun to realise that Maritas is a hotbed of scoundrels—the very scum and rabble of creation—blackguards whom their own countries have, for the most part, refused to tolerate—some of them half-breeds, all of them savages? Haven't you yet begun to ask yourself what you may expect from these devils when they take the law into their own hands? I tell you, mademoiselle, it may happen this very night. It may be happening now!"

She raised her eyes at that—dark eyes that gleamed momentarily and were as swiftly lowered. When she spoke, her low voice held a thrill of scorn.

"Not now, monsieur," she said. "To-night—possibly! But not now—not without you to lead them!"

Pierre Dumaresq made a slight movement. It could not have been called a menace, though it was in a fashion suggestive of violence suppressed—the violence of the baited bull not fully roused to the charge.

"You are not wise, Mademoiselle Stephanie," he said.

way, mademoiselle—and if you are wise you will take it without delay. There is only one man in Maritas who can save you. So far as I know, there is only one man willing to attempt it. That man holds you already in the hollow of his hand. You will be wise to make terms with him while you can.”

His tone was curiously calm, almost cynical. His eyes were still fixed unswervingly upon her face. They beat down the haughty surprise with which for a few seconds she encountered them.

“Yes, mademoiselle,” he resumed quietly, as though she had spoken. “He is a man whom you despise from the bottom of your soul; but for all that, he is not wholly despicable. Nor is he incapable of deserving your trust if you will bestow it upon him. It is all a question of trust.” He smiled grimly at the word. “Whatever you expect from him, that you will receive in full measure. He does not disappoint his friends—or his enemies.”

He paused. She was listening with eyes downcast, but her face was a very mask of cold disdain.

“Monsieur,” she said, with stately deliberation, “I do not—wholly—understand you. But it would be wasting your time and my own to ask you to explain. As I said before, in the event of a crisis I can secure my own safety.”

“Nevertheless,” said Pierre Dumaresq with a deliberation even greater than her own, “I will explain, since a clear understanding seems to me advisable. I am asking you to marry me, Mademoiselle Stephanie, in order to ensure your safety. It is practically your only alternative now, and it must be taken at once. I shall know how to protect my wife. Marry me, and I will take you out of the city to my home on the other side of the island. My yacht is there in readiness, and escape at any time would be easy.”

“Escape, monsieur!” Sharply she broke in upon him. Her coldness was all gone in a sudden flame of indignation by the sheer arrogance of his bearing. “Escape from whom—from what?”

He was silent an instant, almost as if disconcerted. Then :

"Escape from your enemies, mademoiselle," he rejoined sternly. "Escape from the mercy of the mob, which is all you can expect if you stay here."

Her eyes flashed over him in a single, searing glance of the most utter, the most splendid contempt. Then :

"You are more than kind, Monsieur Dumaresq," she said. "But your suggestion does not recommend itself to me. In short, I should prefer—the mercy of the mob."

The man's brows met ferociously. His hands clenched. He almost looked for the moment as though he would strike her. But she did not flinch before him, and very slowly the tension passed. Yet his eyes shone terribly upon her as a sword-blade that is flashed in the sunlight.

"A strange preference, mademoiselle," he remarked at length, turning to pick up his riding-switch. "Possibly you may change your mind—before it is too late."

"Never!" she answered proudly.

And Pierre Dumaresq laughed—a sudden, harsh laugh, and turned to go. It was only what he had expected, after all, but it galled him none the less. He uttered no threat of any sort; only at the door he stood for an instant and looked back at her. And the woman's heart contracted within her as though her blood had turned to ice.

II

When she was alone, when his departing footsteps had ceased to echo along the corridor without, Mademoiselle Stephanie drew a long, quivering breath and moved to a chair by the window. She sank into it with the abandonment of a woman at the end of her strength, and sat passive with closed eyes.

For three years now she had lived in this turbulent island of Maritas. For three years she had watched discontent gradually merge into rebellion and anarchy. And now she knew that at last the end was near.

Her stepfather, the Governor, held his post under the French Government, but France at that time was too occupied with matters nearer home to spare much attention for the little island in the Atlantic and its seething unrest. De Rochefort was considered a capable man, and certainly if treachery and cruelty could have upheld his authority he would have maintained his ascendency without difficulty. But the absinthe demon had gripped him with resistless strength, and all his shrewdness had long since been drained away.

Day by day he plunged deeper into the vice that was destroying him, and Stephanie could but stand by and watch the gradual gathering of a storm that was bound to overwhelm them both.

There was no love between them. They were bound together by circumstance alone. She had gone to the place to be with her dying mother, and had remained there at that mother's request. Madame de Rochefort's belief in her husband had never been shaken, and, dying, she had left her English daughter in his care.

Stephanie had accepted a position that there was no one else to fill, and then had begun the long martyrdom that, she now saw, could have only one ending. She and the Governor were doomed. Already the great wave of revolution towered above them. Very soon it would burst and sweep both away into the terrible vortex of destruction.

It was only of late that she had come to realise this, and the horror of the awakening still at times had power to appal her. For she knew she was utterly unprotected. She had tried in vain to rouse the Governor to see the ever-growing danger, had striven desperately to open his eyes to the unmistakable signs of the coming change. He had laughed at her at first, and later, when she had implored him to resign his post, he had brutally refused.

She had never approached him again on the matter, seeing the futility of argument; but on that self-same day she had provided herself with a means of escape which could not fail her when the last terrible moment arrived. Flight she never contemplated. It would have been an utter impossibility. She was without

friends, without money. Her relations in England were to her as beings in another sphere. She had known them in her childhood, but they had since dropped out of her existence. The only offer of help that had reached her was that which she had just rejected from the man whom, of all others, she most hated and desired to avoid.

She shivered suddenly and violently as she recalled the interview. Was it possible that she feared him now? She had always disliked him from the earliest conscious of something in his manner that perpetually excited her antagonism. She had felt his lynx eye watching her continually throughout the latter struggle and she had known always that he was watching for her downfall.

He was the richest man in the island, and as such his influence was considerable. He had not yet made common cause with the revolutionary party, but it was generally felt that his sympathies were on their side and it was in him that the majority hoped to find a leader when the time for rebellion should be ripe. He had never committed himself to do so, but no one on either side doubted his intentions. Mademoiselle Stephanie, as every one called her, least of all.

She had been accustomed to meeting him fairly often though he had never been a very frequent guest at the palace. Perhaps he divined her aversion, or perhaps—and this was the more likely supposition—his hatred of the Governor debarred him from enjoying his hospitality.

He was a man of fierce independence and passionate temperament, possessing withal a dogged tenacity that she always ascribed to the fact that he was born of an English mother. But she had never before that day credited him with the desire to exercise a personal influence in her life. She had avoided him by instinct and till that day he had always seemed to acquiesce.

His offer of marriage had been utterly unexpected. Regarding him as she did, it seemed to her little short of an insult. She hardly knew what motive to ascribe to him for it; but circumstances seemed to point to

one—ambition. No doubt he thought that she might prove of use to him when he stepped into the Governor's place.

Well, he had his answer—a very emphatic one. He could scarcely fail to take her at her word. She smiled faintly to herself even while she shivered, as she recalled the scarcely suppressed fury with which he had received his dismissal. She was glad that she had managed to pierce through that immaculate armour of self-complacence just once. She had not been woman otherwise.

III

An intense stillness brooded over the city. The night was starless, the sea black as ink. Stephanie stood alone in the darkness of her balcony, and listened to the silence.

Seven days had elapsed since her interview with Pierre Dumaresq—seven days of horrible, nerve-racking suspense, of anguish foreboding, of ever-creeping, leaden-footed despair. And now at last, though the suspense still held her, she knew that the end had come. Only that evening, as her carriage had been turning in at the palace gates, a bomb had been flung under the wheels. By some miracle it had not exploded. She had passed on unharmed.

But the ghastly incident was to her as the sounding of her own death-knell. Standing there with her face to the sea, she was telling herself that she would never see the daylight again. The very soldiers that guarded them were revolutionists at heart. They were only waiting, so she believed, for a strong man's word of command to throw open the palace doors to frenzied murderers.

No sound came up to her from the motionless sea, no faintest echo of waves upon the shore. The stillness hung like a weight upon the senses. There was something sinister about it, something vaguely terrible. Yet, as she stood there waiting, she was not afraid. Something deeper than fear was in her heart. Pulsing

through and through her like an electric current was deep and passionate revolt against the fate that awaited her.

She could not have said whence it came, this sudden wild rebellion that tore her quivering heart, but possessed her to the exclusion of all besides. She told herself a hundred times before that death, when came, would be welcome. Yet, now that death was near her, she longed with all her soul to live. She yearned unspeakably to flee away from this evil place to go out into the wide spaces of the earth and to feel the sunshine that as yet had never touched her life.

They thought her cold and proud, these people who hated her; but could they have seen the tears that rolled down her face that night there might have been some among them to pity her. But she was the victim of circumstance, bound and helpless, and, though a woman's heart might agonise, there was none to know.

A sudden sound in the night—a sharp sound like the crack of a whip, but louder, more menacing, more nervously piercing. She turned, every muscle tense, and listened with bated breath.

It had not come from the garden below her. The silence hung there like a pall. Stay! What was that? The sound of a movement on the terrace under her balcony—a muffled, stealthy sound.

There was no sentry there, she knew. The sentries on that side of the palace were posted at the great iron gates that shut off the garden from the road which ran along the shore to the fortress above.

A spasm of fear, sharp as physical pain, ran through her. She stepped quickly back into the room; but there she stopped, stopped deliberately to wrestle with the terror which had swooped so suddenly upon her. She had maintained her self-control admirably a few hours before in the face of frightful danger, but now in this awful silence it threatened to desert her. Desperately, determinedly, she brought it back inch by inch till the panic in her vanished and her heart began to beat more bravely.

She went at length and opened the door that led into

the long corridor outside her apartments. The place was deserted. The silence hung like death. She stood a moment, gathering her courage, then passed out. She must ascertain if the Governor were in his room, and warn him—if he would be warned.

She had nearly traversed the length of the corridor when again the silence was rent suddenly and terribly by that sound that was like the crack of a whip. She stopped short, all the blood racing back to her heart. She knew it now beyond a doubt. She had known it before in her secret soul. It was the report of a rifle in the palace square.

As she stood irresolute, listening with straining nerves, another sound began to grow out of the night, gathering strength with every instant, a long, fierce roar that resembled nothing that she had ever heard, yet which she knew instinctively for what it was—the raging tumult of an angry crowd. It was like the yelling of a thousand demons.

Suddenly it swelled to an absolute pandemonium of sound, and she shrank appalled. The sudden paralyzing conviction flashed upon her that the palace had been deserted by its guards and was in the hands of murderers. She seemed to hear them swarming everywhere, unopposed, yet lusting for blood, while she, a defenceless woman, stood cowering against a door.

Sheer physical horror seized upon her. The mercy of the mob! The mercy of the mob! The words ran red-hot in her brain. She knew well what she might expect from them. They would tear her limb from limb.

She could not face it. She must escape. Even now surely she could escape. Back in her room, only the length of the corridor away, was deliverance. Surely she could reach it in time! Like a hunted creature she gathered herself together, and, turning, fled along the way she had come.

She rushed at length, panting, into her room, and, without a pause or glance around, fled into the bedroom beyond. It was here, it was here that her deliverance lay, safe hidden in a secret drawer.

The place was in darkness save for the light that streamed after her through the open door. Shaking in every limb, near to fainting, she groped her way across the floor—almost fell against—her little writing-table and sank upon her knees before it—for the moment to spend to move.

But a slight sound that seemed to come from near a hand aroused her. She started up in a fresh panic, pulled out a drawer, that fell with a crash from her trembling hands, and began to feel behind for a secret spring. Oh, she had been a fool, a fool to hide it so securely! She would never find it in the darkness.

Nevertheless, groping, her quivering fingers soon discovered that which they sought. The secret slide opened and she felt for what lay beyond. A moment later she was clasping tightly a little silver flask.

And then, with deliverance actually within her hold, she paused. Kneeling there in the darkness she strove to collect her thoughts, that she might not die in panic. It was not death that she feared just then. She knew that it would come to her swiftly, she believed painlessly. But she would not die before she need. She would wait a little. Perhaps when the wild tumult at her heart had subsided she would be able to pray, not for deliverance from death—there could be no alternative now—but for peace.

So, kneeling alone, she waited; and presently, growing calmer, removed the top of the flask so that she might be ready.

Seconds passed. Her nerves were growing steadier; the mad gallop of her heart was slackening.

She leaned her head on her hand and closed her eyes.

And then, all in a moment, fear seized her again—the sudden consciousness of some one near her, some one watching. With a gasp she started to her feet, and on the instant there came the click of the electric switch by the door, and the room was flooded with light.

Dazzled, almost blinded, she stared across the intervening space, and met the steely, relentless eyes of **Pierre Dumaresq**!

IV

She stood motionless, staring, as one dazed. He, without apology or word of any sort, strode straight forward. His face expressed stern determination, naught else.

But ere he reached her she awoke to action, stepping sharply backwards so that the table was between them. He came to a stand perforce in front of it and looked her full and piercingly in the eyes.

"Mademoiselle," he said, and his voice was so curt that it sounded brutal, "you must come at once. The palace is in the hands of murderers. The Governor has been assassinated. In a few seconds more they will be at your door. Come!"

She recoiled from him with a face of horror.

"With you, monsieur? Never!" she cried.

He laid his hand upon the table and leaned forward.

"With me, yes," he said, speaking rapidly, yet with lips that scarcely seemed to move. "I have come for you, and I mean to take you. Be wise, Mademoiselle Stephanie! Come quietly!"

She scarcely heard him. Frenzy had gripped her—wild, unreasoning, all-mastering frenzy. The supreme moment had come for her, and, with a face that was like a death-mask, she raised the silver flask to her lips.

But no drop of its contents ever touched them, for in that instant Pierre vaulted the intervening table and hurled himself upon her. The flask flew from her hand and spun across the room, falling she knew not where; while she herself was caught in the man's arms and held in a grip like iron.

She struggled fiercely to free herself, but for many seconds she struggled in vain. Then, just as her strength was beginning to leave her, he abruptly set her free.

"Come!" he said. "There is no time for childish folly. Find a cloak, and we will go."

His tone was peremptory, but it held no anger.

Turning from her, he walked deliberately away into the outer room.

She sank back trembling against the wall, nearer to collapse than she had ever been before. But the momentary respite had its effect, and instinctively she began to gather herself together for fresh effort. He had wrested her deliverance from her, but she would never accept what he offered in exchange. She would never escape with this man. She would sooner—yes, a thousand times sooner—face the mercy of the mob.

"Mademoiselle Stephanie!" Impatiently his voice came to her from the further room. "Are you coming, or am I to fetch you?"

She did not answer. A sudden wild idea had formed in her brain. If she could slip past him—if she could reach the outer door—he would never overtake her on the corridor. But she must be brave, she must be subtle, she must watch her opportunity.

With some semblance of composure she took out a long travelling cloak, and walked into the room in which he awaited her. With a start of surprise, she saw him standing by the open window.

"This way, mademoiselle," he said curtly; and she realised that he must have entered from the garden.

"One moment, monsieur," she returned, and quietly crossed the room to the door at the other end.

It was closed. It must have swung to behind her, for she did not remember closing it.

He made no attempt to stop her. He could not surely have guessed her intention, for he remained motionless by the window, watching her. Her heart was thumping as though it would choke her, but yet she controlled herself. He must not suspect till the door was open, till the passage was clear before her, and pursuit of no avail.

She reached out a quivering hand and grasped the ebony knob. Now—now for the last and greatest effort of her life! Sharply she turned the handle, pulled at it, wrenched it with frantic force, finally turned from it and confronted the man at the window with eyes that were hunted, desperate.

"Let me go!" she gasped hoarsely. "How dare you keep me here against my will?"

"I have no desire to keep you here, mademoiselle," he answered. "I am only waiting to take you away."

"I refuse to go with you!" she cried. "I would rather die a thousand times!"

His brows contracted into a single grim line. He left the window and came towards her.

But at his action she sprang away like a mad thing, dodged him, avoided him, then leapt suddenly upon a chair and snatched a rapier from a group of swords arranged in a circle upon the wall. The light fell full upon her ashen face and eyes of horror. She was beside herself.

All her instincts urged her to resistance. She had always shrunk from this man. If she could only hold him at bay for a little—if she could only resist long enough—surely she heard the feet of the murderers upon the corridor already! It would not take them long to batter down the door and take her life!

As she sprang to the ground again, Pierre spoke. The frown had gone from his face; it wore a faint, ironical smile. His eyes, alert, unblinking, marked her every movement as the eyes of a lynx upon its prey. He did not appear in the least disconcerted. There was even a sort of terrible patience in his attitude, as though he already saw the end of the struggle.

"Would it not be wiser, mademoiselle," he said, "to reserve your steel for an enemy?"

She met his piercing look for an instant as she compelled her white lips to answer. "You are the worst enemy that I have."

He threw back his head with an arrogant gesture very characteristic of him. "By your own choice, mademoiselle," he said.

"Yes," she flung back passionately. "I prefer you as an enemy."

He laughed at that—a fiendish, scoffing laugh that made her shrink in every nerve. Then, with unmoved composure, he walked to the mantelpiece and took up one of the fobs that lay there.

"Now," he said quietly, "since you are determined to fight me, so be it! But when you are beaten Mademoiselle Stephanie, do not ask for mercy!"

But she drew back sharply from his advance. "That is one of those rapiers," she said.

He shook his head, still with that mocking smile upon his lips. "This will serve my purpose better," he said. "Are you ready, mademoiselle? On guard!"

And with that his weapon crossed hers. She knew his purpose the moment she encountered it. It was written in every grim line of his countenance, meant the conflict to be very short.

She was no novice in the art of fencing, but she was no match for him. Moreover, she could not meet the pitiless eyes that stared straight into hers. They attracted her. They terrified her. Yet every moment seemed to her to be something gained. Through all the wild chaos of her overstrung nerves she was listening, listening desperately, for the sound of feet outside the door. If she could only withstand him for a few seconds! If only her strength would last!

But she was nearing exhaustion, and she knew. Her brain had begun to swim. She saw him in a blur before her quivering vision. The hand that grasped the rapier was too numb to obey her behests. Sudden there came a tumult upon the corridor without—hoarse yelling and the rush of many feet. It was the sound she had been listening for, but it startled, it unnerved her. And in that instant Pierre thrust through her guard and with a lightning twist of the wrist sent his weapon hurtling through the air.

The sound of its fall was lost in the clamour outside the door—a clamour so sudden and so horrible that it did for Stephanie that which nothing else on earth could have accomplished. It drove her to the man she hated for protection.

As he flung down the foil, she made a swift movement towards him. There was no longer shrinking in his eyes. She was simply a trembling, panic-stricken woman, turning instinctively to the stronger power for help. A little earlier she could have died without

tremor, but the wild strife of the past few minutes had broken down her fortitude. Her strength was gone.

"Monsieur!" she panted. "Monsieur!"

He caught her roughly to him. Even in that moment of deadly peril there was a certain fiery exultation about him. He held her fast, his eyes gazing straight down into hers.

"Shall I save you?" he said. "I can die with you—if you prefer it."

"Save me!" she cried piteously. "Save me!"

He bent his head, and suddenly, fiercely, savagely, he kissed her white lips. Then, before she could utter cry or protest, he whirled her across the room to the open window, catching up her cloak as he went; and, almost before the horror of his kiss had dawned upon her, she was out upon the balcony, alone with him in the awful dark.

He kept his hand upon her as he stepped over the stone railing, but all power of independent action seemed to have left her. She was as one stunned or beneath some spell. She stood quite rigid while he groped for and found the ladder by which he had ascended. Then, as he lifted her, she let herself go into his arms without resistance. He clasped her hands behind his neck, and she clung there mechanically as he made the swift descent.

They reached the ground in safety, and he set her on her feet. The terrace on which they found themselves was deserted. But as they stood in the dark they heard the fiends in the corridor burst into the room they had just left. And Pierre Dumaresq, lowering the ladder, laughed to himself a low, fierce laugh, without words.

The next instant there came a rush of feet upon the balcony above them and a torrent of angry shouting. Stephanie shrank against a pillar, but in a moment Pierre's arm encircled her, impelling her irresistibly, and they fled across the terrace through the darkness. The man was still laughing as he ran. There seemed to her something devilish in his laughter.

Down through the palace garden they sped, she

gasping and stumbling in nightmare flight, he strongly upholding her, till half a dozen revolver shots pierced the infuriated uproar behind them and something that burned with a red-hot agony struck her left hand. She cried out involuntarily, and Pierre ceased his headlong rush for safety.

"You are hit?" he questioned. "Where?"

But she could not answer him, could not so much as stand. His voice seemed to come from an immense distance. She hardly heard his words. She was sinking, sinking into a void unfathomable.

He did not stay to question further. Abruptly he stooped, gathered her up, slung her across his shoulder, and ran on.

V

When Stephanie opened her eyes again the sound of the sea was in her ears, and she felt as if she must have heard it for some time. She was lying in a chair amid surroundings wholly strange to her, and some one—a man whose face she could not see—was beside her, bending over a table, evidently engaged upon something that occupied his most minute attention. She watched him dreamily for a little, till the immense breadth of his shoulders struck a quick-growing fear into her heart; then she made a sudden effort to raise herself.

Instantly she was stabbed by a dart of pain so acute that she barely repressed a cry.

"Keep still, mademoiselle!" It was Pierre's voice; he spoke without turning. "I shall not hurt you more than I can help."

She sank back again, shuddering uncontrollably. She knew now what he was doing. It had flashed upon her in that moment of horrible suffering. He was probing for a bullet in her left hand. Dumbly she shut her eyes and set herself to endure.

But the pain was almost insupportable; it seemed to rack her whole body. And the presence of the man she

feared, his nearness to her, his touch, added tenfold to the torture. Yet she was helpless, and, spent, exhausted though she was, for very pride she would utter no complaint.

Minutes passed. She was near to fainting again, when abruptly Pierre stood up. She heard him move, and she was conscious of a blessed lessening of the pain. But she dared not stir or open her eyes, lest her self-control should forsake her utterly. She could only lie and wait in quivering suspense.

He bent over her without speaking, and suddenly she felt the rim of a glass against her lips. With a start she looked up. His swarthy face was close to her own, but it was grimly immobile. He seemed to have clad himself from head to foot in an impenetrable armour of reserve. His lips were set in a firm line, as though all speech were locked securely behind them.

Mutely she obeyed his unspoken command and drank. The draught was unlike anything she had ever tasted before. It revived her, renewing her failing strength.

"I thank you, monsieur," she said faintly.

He set down the glass, and busied himself once more with her wounded hand.

"I shall not hurt you any further," he said, as involuntarily she winced.

And he kept his word. The worst of his task was over. He only bathed and bandaged with a gentleness and dexterity at which she marvelled.

At last he looked at her.

"You are better?" he asked.

She met his eyes for an instant. They were absolutely steady, but they told her nothing whatever of his thoughts.

"Yes, I am better," she said, with an effort.

"Can you walk?" he said.

"I think so, monsieur."

"Then come with me," he rejoined, "and I will show you where you can rest."

She sat up slowly. He bent to help her, but she would not accept his help till, rising to her feet, she felt

the floor sway beneath her. Then, with a sharp exclamation, she clutched for support and gripped his proffered arm.

"Monsieur!" she gasped.

He held her up, for she was tottering. Her pale face stared panic-stricken up to his.

"Monsieur!" she gasped again. "What is this? Where am I?"

He made answer curtly, in a tone that sounded repressive.

"You are on board my yacht, mademoiselle." She swayed, and he put his arm around her. "You are in safety," he said, in the same brief fashion.

"As—as your prisoner?" she whispered, trying weakly to free herself from his hold.

"As my guest," he said.

By an immense effort she controlled herself, meeting his stern eyes with something like composure. But the memory of that single, scorching kiss was still with her. And in spite of her utmost resolution, she flinched from his direct gaze.

"If I am your guest," she said, her low voice quivering a very little, "I am at liberty to come—and to go—as I will."

"Absolutely!" said Pierre, and she fancied for an instant that he smiled.

"You will take me wherever I desire to go?" she persisted, still battling with her agitation.

"With one exception," he answered quietly. "I will not take you back to Maritas."

She shivered. "Then where, monsieur?"

His expression changed slightly. She had a momentary glimpse of the arrogance she dreaded.

"The world is wide," he said. "And there is plenty of time before us. We need not decide to-night."

She trembled more at the tone than the words. "I do not think you would leave Maritas so soon," she said.

"Not, mademoiselle?" His voice suddenly—it almost held a threat.

withdrawn herself from him, but she was

hardly capable of standing alone. She leaned secretly against the chair from which she had just risen.

"Because," she made answer, still desperately facing him, "I thought that Maritas wanted you."

He uttered a brief laugh that sounded savage.

"That was yesterday," he told her grimly. "I have forfeited my popularity since then."

A slow, painful blush rose in Stephanie's drawn face, but she shrank no longer from his look. "And you have gained nothing in exchange," she said, her voice very low.

"Except what I desired to gain," said Pierre Dumaesq.

She made a slight, involuntary movement, and instantly her brows contracted. She closed her eyes with a shudder. The pain was almost intolerable.

A moment later she felt his strong arms lift her, and a sudden passion of misery swept over her. Where was the use of feigning strength when he knew so well her utter weakness; of fighting, when she was already so hopelessly beaten; of begging his mercy even when he had warned her so emphatically that she must not expect it.

Despair entered into her. She could resist him no longer by so much as the lifting of a finger. And as the knowledge swept overwhelmingly upon her, the last poor shred of her pride crumbled to nothing in a rush of anguished tears.

Pierre said no more. His hard mouth grew a little harder, his steely eyes a shade more steely—that was all. He bore her unfaltering through the saloon to the state cabin beyond, and laid her down there.

In another second she heard the click of the latch, and his step upon the threshold. Softly the door closed. Softly he went away.

VI

And Stephanie slept. From her paroxysm of weeping she passed into deep, untroubled slumber, and hour after hour slipped over her unconscious head while she lay at rest.

When she awoke at last the evening sun was streaming in through the tiny port-hole by the head of her couch, and she knew that she must have slept throughout the day. She was very drowsy still, and for a while she lay motionless, listening to the monotonous beat of the yacht's engines, and watching the white spray as it tossed past.

Very gradually she began to remember what had happened to her. She glanced at her wounded hand, swathed in bandages and resting upon a cushion. Who had arranged it so, she wondered? How had it been done without her waking?

At the back of her mind hovered the answers to both these questions, but she could not bring herself to face them—not yet. She was loath to withdraw herself from the haze of sleep that still hung about her. She shrank intuitively from a full awakening.

And then, while she still loitered on the way to consciousness, there came a soft movement near her, and in a moment all her repose was shattered.

Pierre, his dark face grimly inscrutable, bent over her with a cup of something steaming in his hand.

She shrank at the sight of him. Her whole body seemed to contract. Involuntarily almost she shut her eyes. Her heart leaped and palpitated within her like a chained thing seeking to escape.

Then suddenly it stood still. He was speaking.

"Mademoiselle Stephanie," he said, "I beg you will not agitate yourself. You have no cause for agitation. It is not by my own wish that I intrude upon you. I have no choice."

It was curtly uttered. It sounded rigidly uncompromising. Yet, for some reason wholly inexplicable to herself, she was conscious of relief. She opened her eyes, though she did not dare to raise them.

"How is that, monsieur?" she said faintly.

He was silent for a moment; then:

"There is no woman on board besides yourself," he told her briefly. "Your own people deserted you. I had no time to search for others."

She felt as if his eyes were drawing her own. Against

her will she looked up and met them. They told her nothing, but at least they did not frighten her afresh.

"Where are you going to take me?" she asked.

"We will speak of that later," he said. "Will you drink this now? You need it."

"What is it, monsieur."

For an instant she saw his faint, hard smile.

"It is broth, mademoiselle, nothing more."

"Nothing?" she said, still hesitating. "You—I think you gave me a narcotic before!"

"I did," said Pierre. "And it did you good."

She did not attempt to contradict him. The repression of his manner held her silent. Without further demur she sought to raise herself.

But her head swam the moment she lifted it from the pillow, and she sank down again with closed eyes and drawn brows.

"In a moment," she whispered.

"Permit me," said Pierre quietly; and slipped his arm under her pillow.

She looked up sharply to protest, but the words died on her lips. She saw that he would not be denied.

He supported her with absolute steadiness while she drank, not uttering a word. Finally, he lowered her again, and spoke:

"It is time that your wound was attended to. With your permission I will proceed with it at once."

"Is it serious, monsieur?" she asked.

"I can tell you better when I have seen it," he rejoined, beginning to loosen the bandage. "Does it pain you?" as she winced.

"A little," she acknowledged, with quivering lips.

He glanced at her, and for the first time in all her experience of him he spoke with a hint of kindness.

"It will not take long, Mademoiselle Stephanie. Shut your eyes till it is over."

She obeyed him mutely. Her fear of the man was merging into a curious feeling of reliance. She was beginning to realise that her enforced dependence upon him had in some fashion altered his attitude towards her.

"No," he said at last. "It is not a very serious matter, though it may give you some trouble till it is healed. You will need to keep very quiet, mademoiselle and"—again momentarily she saw his smile—"avoid agitating yourself as much as possible."

"You may rely upon me to do that, monsieur," she returned with dignity; "if I am allowed to do so."

Again for an instant she felt his eyes upon her, as she thought he frowned; but he made no comment.

Quietly he finished his bandaging before he spoke again.

"If there is any other way in which I can serve you he said then, "you have only to command me."

She turned upon her pillow and faced him. The gradual reviving of her physical strength helped her least to simulate some of her ancient pride that he had trampled so ruthlessly underfoot.

"What do you mean by that?" she questioned calmly.

He met her look fully and sternly.

"I mean, Mademoiselle Stephanie, precisely what I have said—no more, no less!"

In spite of her utmost effort, she flinched a little. Yet she would not be conquered by a look.

"I am to treat you as my servant, then, monsieur?" she questioned.

He dropped his eyes suddenly from hers.

"If it suits you to do so," he said.

"The situation is not of my choosing," she reminded him.

"Nor mine," he answered dryly.

Her heart sank, but with an effort she maintained a fair show of courage.

"Monsieur Dumaresq," she said, "I think that you mean to be kind. I shall act upon that assumption. Since I am thrown upon your hospitality under circumstances which neither of us would have chosen—"

"I did not say that, mademoiselle," he interposed. "I have no quarrel with the gods that govern circumstance. My only regret is that, as my guest, you should be inefficiently served. If you find yourself able

treat me as a servant it will be my pleasure to serve you."

She did not understand his tone. It seemed to her that he was trying in some fashion to warn her. Again the memory of his kiss swept over her; again to the very heart of her she shrank.

"I think," she said slowly, "that I am more your prisoner than your guest, Monsieur Dumaresq."

"It is not always quite wise to express our thoughts," he rejoined, with deliberate cynicism. "I have ventured to point that out to you before."

Again he baffled her. She looked at him doubtfully. He was standing up beside her on the point of departure. He returned her gaze with his steely eyes almost as though he challenged her to penetrate to the citadel they guarded.

With a sharp sigh she abandoned the contest. "I wish I understood you," she said.

He jerked his shoulders expressively.

"You knew me a week ago better than I knew myself," he remarked. "What more would you have?"

She did not answer him. She only moved her head upon the pillow with a gesture of weariness. She knew that she would search those pitiless eyes in vain for the key to the puzzle, and she only longed to be left alone. He could not, surely, refuse to grant her unspoken desire.

Yet for a moment it seemed that he would prolong the interview. He stood above her, motionless, arrogant, frowning downwards as though he had something more to say. Then, while she waited tensely, dreading the very sound of his voice, his attitude suddenly underwent a change. The thin lips tightened sharply. He turned away.

VII

After he was gone, Stephanie sat up and gazed for a long, long time at the surge of water leaping past the port-hole.

She felt stunned by the events of the past twenty.

four hours. She could only review them with a numbing amazement. The long suspense had ended so suddenly and so terribly. She could hardly begin to realise that it was indeed over, that the storm she had foreseen for so long had burst at last, sweeping away the Governor in headlong overthrow, and leaving her bruised and battered indeed, but still alive. She had never thought to survive him. She had not loved him, but her life had been so inextricably bound up with his, that she had never seriously contemplated the possibility of life without him. What would happen to her? she asked herself. How would it end?

There was no denying the fact that, however inexplicable Pierre's treatment might be, she was completely and irretrievably his prisoner.

There was no one to deliver her from him; no one to know or care what became of her. Her importance had crumbled to nothing so far as the world was concerned. She had simply ceased to count. What did he mean to do with her? Why had he refused to discuss the future?

Gradually, with a certain reluctance, her thoughts came down to her recent interview with him, and again the feeling that he had been trying to convey something that she had failed to grasp possessed her. Why had he warned her against attempting to define her position? What had those last words of his meant?

One thing at least was certain. Though he had done little to reassure her, she must make a determined effort to overcome her fear of the man. She must not again shrink openly in his presence. She must feign confidence, though she felt it not. Something that he had said a week before on the occasion of his extraordinary proposal of marriage recurred to her at this point with curious force.

"It is all a question of trust," he had said, and she recalled the faint, derisive smile with which he had spoken. "Whatever you expect, that you will receive." The words dwelt in her memory with a strange persistence. She had a feeling that they meant a good deal. It was possible—surely it was possible—that if a

trusted him, he might prove himself to be trustworthy. If only her nerves were equal to the task! If only the terrible memory of his kiss could be blotted for ever and ever from her mind!

She rose at last and began to move about the little state cabin. It was furnished luxuriously in every detail—almost, she told herself with a shiver, as though for a bride. Catching sight of her reflection in a mirror, she stared aghast, scarcely recognising herself in the wild-eyed, haggard woman who met her gaze. Small wonder that she had deemed him repressive, she told herself, for she looked like a demented creature.

That astounding glimpse did more for her than any mental effort. Quite calmly she set to work to render her appearance more normal, and, crippled though she was, she succeeded at length in attaining a fairly satisfactory result. At least, she did not think that a masculine eye would detect anything amiss.

This achieved, she finally drew her travelling cloak about her and went to the door. It resisted her effort to open, but in a moment she heard a step on the other side and the withdrawal of a bolt.

Pierre opened the door for her, and stood back for her to pass. But she remained on the threshold.

"Monsieur Dumaresq, why did you lock me in?" she asked him, with something of her old stateliness of demeanour, which had made men deem her proud.

His grey eyes comprehended her in a single glance. He made her his curt, British bow.

"You were overwrought, Mademoiselle Stephanie," he said. "I was not sure of your intentions. But I see that the precaution was unnecessary."

She understood him, and a faint flush rose in her pale face.

"Quite," she responded. "I have come to my senses, monsieur, and I know how to value your protection. I shall not seek that means of escape so long as you are safeguarding me."

She smiled with the words, a brave and steadfast smile, and extended her hand to him.

The gesture was queenly, but the instant his fingers

closed upon it she quivered uncontrollably from head to foot. A sudden mist descended before her eyes, and she groped out blindly for support. Her overtaxed nerves had betrayed her again.

"Come and sit down, mademoiselle," a quiet voice said; and a steady arm impelled her forward. "There is something of a swell to-night. I am afraid you feel it."

So courteous was the tone that she almost gasped her astonishment. She sank into a chair, and made a desperate effort to regain her self-control.

"You are very kind, monsieur," she said, not very steadily. "No doubt I shall become accustomed to it."

"I do not think you are quite fit for this," he said gravely.

She looked up at him with more confidence.

"I am really stronger than you think," she said. "And I wanted to speak to you on the subject of our destination."

She fancied that he stiffened a little at the words, but he merely said:

"Well, mademoiselle?"

"Will you not sit down," she said, "and tell me where the yacht is going?"

He sat down on the edge of the table. There was undeniable restlessness in his attitude.

"We are running due west at the present moment," he said.

"With what object?" she asked.

"With no object, mademoiselle," he rejoined, "except to keep out of reach of our enemies."

"You have left Maritas for good?" she asked.

He uttered a short laugh.

"Certainly. I have nothing to go back for."

"And you are indifferent," she questioned, with slight hesitation, "as to the direction you take?"

"No, I am not indifferent," he answered curtly.

She was silent. His manner puzzled her, made her afraid in spite of herself.

There followed a short pause, then he turned slightly and looked at her.

"Have you any particular wishes upon the subject?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

Her reply was very low.

"Let me hear them," said Pierre.

"I should like," she said slowly, "if it be possible, to go to England. I have relations there who might help me."

"Help you, mademoiselle?"

His tone sounded harsh.

"To earn my living," she answered simply.

His brows met suddenly.

"It is a far cry to England," he observed.

"I know it," she said. "I am counting upon your kindness."

"I see," said Pierre. "I am to take you there, and leave you. Is that it?"

She bent her head.

"If you will, monsieur."

"And if I will not?" he said.

She was silent.

He stood up abruptly, and walked to the farther end of the saloon. When he came back his face was set and grim. He halted in front of her.

"I am to do this thing for nothing?" he said. And it seemed to her that, though uttered quietly, his words came through clenched teeth.

Again wild panic was at her heart, but with all her strength she held it back.

"You offered to serve me, monsieur," she reminded him.

"Even a servant expects to be paid," he rejoined curtly.

"But I have nothing to offer you," she said.

She saw the grey eyes glitter as steel in sudden sunshine. Their brightness was intolerable. She turned her own away.

"Does it not occur to you, Mademoiselle Stephanie," he said, "that your life is more my property than your own at the present moment? Have I no claim to be consulted as to its disposal?"

"None, monsieur," she made answer quickly. "None whatever."

"And yet," he said, "you asked me to save you when—had you preferred it—I would have died with you."

She was silent, remembering with bitterness her wild cry for deliverance.

He waited a little. Then:

"You may have nothing to offer me, Mademoiselle Stephanie," he said, "but, by heaven, you shall take nothing away."

She heard a deep menace in his voice that was like the growl of an angry beast. She shuddered inwardly as she listened, but outwardly she remained calm. She even, after a few moments, mustered strength to rise and face him.

"What is it that you want of me, Monsieur Dumaresq?" she asked. "How can I purchase your services?"

He flung back his head abruptly. She thought that he was going to utter his scoffing laugh. But it did not come. Instead, he looked at her, looked at her long and piercingly, while she stood erect and waited.

At last: "The price for my services," he said deliberately, "is that you marry me as soon as we reach England."

"Marry you!" In spite of her utmost resolution she started, and slightly shrank. "You still desire that?"

"I still desire it," he said.

"And if I refuse?" she questioned, her voice very low.

"You will not refuse," he returned, with conviction. "You dare not refuse."

She stood silent.

"And that being so," said Pierre, with a certain doggedness peculiarly at variance with his fierce and headlong nature, "that being so, Mademoiselle Stephanie, would it not be wiser for you to yield at once?"

"To yield, monsieur?"

Her eyes sought his for the fraction of a second. He was still closely watching her.

"To give me your promise," he said. "It is all I shall ask of you. I shall be satisfied with that."

"And what have you to offer in exchange?" she said.

A strange expression, that was almost a smile, flitted over his hard face.

"I will give you my friendship," he said, "no more, no less."

But still she hesitated, till suddenly, with a gesture wholly arrogant, he held out his hand.

"Trust me," he said, "and I will be trustworthy."

She knew it for a definite promise, however insolently expressed. It was plain that he meant what he said. It was plain that he desired to win her confidence. And in a measure she was reassured. His actions testified to a patience of which she had not deemed him capable.

Slowly, in unconscious submission to his will, she laid her hand in his.

"And afterwards, monsieur?" she said. "Shall I be able to trust you then?"

He leaned slightly towards her, looking more closely into her face.

Then: "All my life, Stephanie," he said, and before she realised his intention he had pressed her hand to his lips with the action of a man who seals an oath.

VIII

From that hour forward, Stephanie was no longer a close prisoner. She was free to wander wherever she would about the yacht, but she never penetrated very far. The vessel was no mere pleasure boat, and there was much that might have interested her, had she been disposed to take an interest therein. But she shrank with a morbid dread from the eyes of the Spanish sailors. She longed unspeakably to hide herself away in unbroken seclusion.

Her wound healed rapidly, so rapidly that Pierre soon

ceased to treat it, but it took much longer for her to recover from the effects of that terrible night at Maritas. The horror of it was with her night and day.

Pierre's treatment of her never varied. He saw to her comfort with unfailing vigilance and consideration, but he never attempted to obtrude himself upon her. He seldom spoke to her unless she addressed him. He never by word or look referred to the compact between them. Her fear of him had sunk away into the background of her thoughts. Furtively she studied him, but he gave her no cause for fear. When she sat on the deck, he never joined her. He did not so much as eat with her till one day, not without much inward trepidation, she invited him to do so. And she marvelled, again and again she marvelled, at his forbearance.

Calmly and uneventfully the endless summer days slipped by. Her strength was undoubtedly returning to her, the youth in her reviving. The long rest was taking effect upon her. The overstrung nerves were growing steady again. Often she would sit and ponder upon the future, but she had no definite idea to guide her. At first she shrank unspeakably from the bare thought of the end of the voyage, but gradually she became accustomed to it. It seemed too remote to be terrible, and her reliance upon Pierre's good faith increased daily. Somehow, unaccountably, she had wholly ceased to regard him as an enemy. Possibly her fears and even her antagonism were only dormant, but at least they did not torment her. She did not start at the sound of his voice, or shrink from the straight regard of those hard eyes. She knew by that instinct that cannot err that he meant to keep his word.

They left the regions of endless summer behind at last, and the cooler breezes of the north swept the long, blue ridges over which they travelled. They came into a more frequented, less dream-like sea, but though many vessels passed them, they were seldom near enough for greeting. And Stephanie came to understand that it was not Pierre's desire to hold much converse with the outer world. Yet she knew that they were heading

straight for England, and their isolation was bound ere long to come to an end.

It was summer weather even in England just then, summer weather in the blue Atlantic, summer everywhere. She spent many hours of each day in a sheltered corner of the deck, watching the leaping waves, green and splendid, racing from the keel. And a strange content was hers while she watched, born of the unwonted peace which of late had wrapped her round. She was as one come into safe harbourage after long and futile tossing upon the waters of strife. She did not question her security. She only knew that it was there.

But one day there came a change—a grey sky and white capped waves. Suddenly and inexplicably, as is the way of the northern climate, the sunshine was withdrawn, the summer weather departed, and there came desolation.

Stephanie's corner on deck was empty. She crouched below, ill, shivering with cold and wretchedness. All day long she listened to the howling wind and pitiless, lashing rain, rising above the sullen roar of the waves. All day long the vessel pitched and tossed, flinging her back and forth while she clung in desperation to the edge of her berth.

Pierre waited upon her from time to time, but he could do little to relieve her discomfort, and he left her for the most part alone.

As evening drew on, the gale increased, and Stephanie, lying in her cabin, could hear the great waves breaking over the deck with a violence that grew more awful with every moment. Her nerves began to give way under the strain. It was a long while since Pierre had been near her, and the loneliness appalled her.

She could endure it no longer at last, and arose with a wild idea of going on deck. The narrow walls of her cabin had become unendurable.

With difficulty, grabbing at first one thing, then another for support, she made her way to the saloon. The place was empty, but a single lamp burned steadily by the door that led to the companion, and guided her halting steps.

The floor was at a steep upward angle when she started, but before she had accomplished half the distance it plunged suddenly downwards, and she was flung forward against the table. Bruised and frightened, she dragged herself up, reached the farther door at a run, only to fall once more against it.

Here she lay for a little, half stunned, till that terrible slow upheaval began again. Then, with a sharp effort, she recalled her scattered senses and struggled up, clinging to the handle. Slowly she mounted, slowly, slowly, till her feet began to slip down that awful slant. Then at the last moment, when she thought she must fall headlong, there came that fearful plunge again, and she knew that the yacht was deep in the trough of some gigantic wave.

The loneliness was terrible. It seemed like the fore-runner of annihilation. She felt that whatever the danger on deck, it must be easier to face than this fearful solitude. And so at last, in a brief lull, she opened the door.

A great swirl of wind and water dashed down upon her on the instant. The lamp behind her flickered and went out, but there was another at the head of the steps to light her halting progress, and, clinging with both hands to the rail, she began to ascend.

The uproar was deafening. It deprived her of the power to think. But she no longer felt afraid. She found this limbo of howling desolation infinitely preferable to the awful loneliness of her cabin. Slowly and with difficulty she made her way.

She had nearly reached the top when a man's figure in streaming oilskins sprang suddenly into the opening. Above the storm she heard a hoarse yell of warning or of anger, she knew not which, and the next instant Pierre was beside her, holding her imprisoned against the hand-rail to which she clung.

She stood up and faced him, still gripping the rail.

"Take me on deck!" she cried to him. "I shall not be afraid."

She had flung her cloak about her, but the hood had blown back from her head, and her hair hung loose.

Pierre looked at her in stern silence, holding her fast. She fancied he was displeased with her for leaving the cabin, and she reiterated her earnest request that he would suffer her to come up just for a little to breathe the fresh air.

"It is so horrible below," she told him. "It frightens me."

Pierre was frowning heavily.

"Do you think you would not be my first care?" he demanded, bracing himself as the vessel plunged to support her with greater security.

She did not answer. There was a touch of ferocity in the question that silenced her. The pitching of the yacht threw her against him the next moment, and her feet slipped from beneath her.

Unconsciously almost she turned and clung to the arms that held her up. They tightened about her to a grip that made her gasp for breath. He lifted her back to the foothold she had lost. His face was more grimly set than she had ever seen it.

She wondered if he were secretly afraid. For they seemed to be sinking down, down, down into the depths of destruction, and only his close holding kept her where she was.

She thought that they were going straight to the bottom, and involuntarily her clinging hands held faster. Involuntarily, too, she raised her eyes to his, seeking, as the human soul is bound to seek, for human comradeship in face of mortal danger.

But the next instant she knew that no thought of danger was in his mind, or if it existed it was obscured by something infinitely greater.

His eyes saw her and her only. The fierce flame of his passion blazed down upon her, searing its terrible way to her soul, dazzling her, hypnotising her, till she could see naught else, could feel naught but the burning intensity of the fire that had kindled so suddenly about her.

A dart of wild dismay went through her as keen as physical pain, but in a moment it was gone. For though he held her caught against his breast and covered her

face with kisses that seemed to seorch her, it was not fear that she felt so much as a gasping wonder that she was unafraid.

IX

When Pierre let her go, she fell, half fainting, against the rail, and must have sunk at his feet had he not sharply stooped and lifted her. Profiting by a brief lull in the tempest, he bore her down the steps and into the dark saloon. She lay quite passive in his arms, dazed, exhausted, but still curiously devoid of fear.

He laid her upon a cushioned locker by the wall, and relighted the lamp. Then, in utter silence, he carried her to her cabin beyond, and left her there. She had a single glimpse of his face as he turned away, and it seemed to her that she had looked upon the face of a man in torture. He went away without a word, and she was left alone.

And so for hours she lay, unmindful of the storm, regardless utterly of aught that happened, lying with wide eyes and burning cheeks, conscious only of that ever-growing wonder that was not fear.

At dawn the wind abated and the yacht began to pitch less. When the sun had been up for a few hours the gale of the night was a thing of the past, and only the white-capped waves were left as a laughing reminder of the storm that had passed over.

The day was brilliant, and Stephanie arose at length with a feeling that she must go up into the sunshine and face the future. The thought of meeting Pierre even could not ultimately detain her below, though it kept her there considerably longer than usual. After all, was she not bound to meet him? Of what use was it to shirk the inevitable?

But when she finally entered the saloon, he was not there. The table was laid for breakfast, and a sailor was at hand to serve her. But of Pierre there was no sign. He evidently had no intention of joining her.

She made no inquiry for him, but as soon as the meal

was over she took her cloak and prepared to go on deck. With nervous haste she passed the scene of the previous night's encounter. She almost expected to find Pierre waiting for her at the top of the companion, but she looked for him in vain. And even when she finally stepped upon the deck and crossed to the rail that she might search the whole length of the yacht, she could not discover him.

A vague uneasiness began to trouble her. The suspense was hard to bear. She longed to meet him and have done with it.

But she longed in vain. All through the sunny hours of the morning she sat or paced in solitude. No one came near her till her breakfast attendant appeared with another meal.

By the end of the afternoon she was thoroughly miserable. She longed intensely to inquire for the yacht's master, yet could not bring herself to do so. Eventually it began to rain, and she went below and sat in the saloon, trying, quite ineffectually, to ease her torment of suspense with a book. But she comprehended nothing of what she read, and when the young cabin steward appeared again to set the dinner she looked up in desperation.

She was on the point of questioning him as to his master's whereabouts; the question, indeed, was already half uttered, when her eyes went beyond him and she broke off short.

Pierre himself was quietly entering through the companion door.

He bowed to her in his abrupt way, and signed to the lad to continue his task.

"He understands no English," he said. "You do not object to his presence?"

She replied in the negative, though in her heart she wished he had dismissed him. She could not meet his eyes before a third person. It added tenfold to her embarrassment.

But when he seated himself near her, she did venture a fleeting glance at him, and was amazed unpeakably by what she saw. For his face was haggard and drawn

like the face of a sick man, and every hint of arrogance was gone from his bearing. He looked beaten.

He began to speak at once, jerkily, unnaturally, almost as if he also were embarrassed. "I have something to say to you," he said, "which I beg you will hear with patience. It concerns your future—and mine."

The strangeness of his manner, his obvious dejection, the amazing humility of his address, combined to endue Stephanie with a composure she had scarcely hoped to attain.

She found herself able to look at him quite steadily, and did so. It was he who—for the first time in her recollection—avoided her eyes.

"What is it, Monsieur Dumaresq?" she asked quietly.

His hands were gripped upon the arms of his chair. He seemed to be holding himself there by force.

"Just this," he said. "I find that your estimate is after all the correct one. You have always regarded me as a blackguard, and a blackguard I am. I am not here to apologise for it, simply to acknowledge my mistake, for, strange as it will seem to you, I took myself for something different. At least when I gave you my word I thought I was capable of keeping it. Well, it is broken, and, that being so, I can no longer hold you to yours. Do you understand, Mademoiselle Stephanie? You are a free woman."

For an instant he looked at her, and an odd thrill of pity ran through her for his humiliation.

She said nothing. She had no words in which to express herself. Moreover, her eyes were suddenly full of unaccountable tears. She could not have trusted her voice.

After a moment he resumed. "There is only one thing left to say. In two days we shall be in British waters. I will land you wherever you wish. But you shall not go from me to earn your own living. You will accept—you *shall* accept"—she heard the stubborn note she had come to know so well in his voice—"sufficient from me to make you independent for the rest of your life. Yes, from me, mademoiselle!" He

looked her straight in the eyes with something of his old arrogance. "You can refuse, of course. No doubt you will refuse. But I can compel you. If you will not have it as a gift, you shall have it as—a bequest."

He ceased, but he continued to sit with his eyes upon her, ready, she knew, to beat down any and every objection she might raise.

She did not speak. She was for the moment too much surprised for speech; but as his meaning dawned upon her, something that was greater than either surprise or pity took possession of her, holding her silent. She only, after several moments, rose and stood with her face turned from him, watching through the port-hole the waves that leaped by, all green and amber, in the light of sunset.

"You understand me clearly, Mademoiselle Stephanie?" he asked at length, in a voice that came harshly through the silence.

She moved slightly, but she did not turn.

"I have never understood you, monsieur," she made answer, her voice very low.

He jerked his shoulders impatiently.

"At least you understand me on this point," he said curtly.

She was silent. At length:

"But you do not understand me," she said.

"Better than you fancy, mademoiselle," he answered bitterly. "I do not think your feelings where I am concerned have ever been very complicated."

Again slightly she moved without looking round.

"I wish you would tell your man to go," she said.

"Mademoiselle?" There was a note of surprise in the query.

"Tell him to go!" she reiterated, with nervous vehemence.

There fell an abrupt silence. Then she heard an imperious snap of the fingers from Pierre, followed instantly by the steward's retiring footsteps.

She waited till she heard them no longer, then slowly she turned. Pierre had not moved from his chair. He was gripping the arms as before. She stood with her

back to the light, thankful for the dimness that obscured her face.

"I—I have something to say to you, monsieur," she said.

"I am listening, mademoiselle," he responded briefly, not raising his eyes.

"Ah, but you must help me," she said, and her voice shook a little. "It—it is no easy thing that I have to say."

He made a fierce movement of unrest.

"How can I help you? I have given you your freedom. What more can I do?"

"You can spare me a moment's kindness," she answered gently. "You may be angry with yourself, but you need not be angry with me also."

"I am not angry with you," he responded half sullenly. "But I can bear no trifling, I warn you. I am not my own master. If you wish to secure yourself from further insult, you will be wise to leave me alone."

"And if not?" she questioned slowly. "If—for instance—I do not feel myself insulted by what happened last night?"

He glanced up at that so suddenly that she felt as if something pierced her.

"Then," he rejoined harshly, "you are a very strange woman, Mademoiselle Stephanie."

"I begin to think I am," she said, with a rather piteous smile. "Yet, for all that, I will not be trifled with either. A compact such as ours can only be cancelled by mutual consent. I think you are rather inclined to forget that."

"Meaning?" said Pierre abruptly.

She drew a sharp breath. Her heart was beating very fast.

"Meaning," she said, "meaning that I do not—and I will not—agree to your proposal, that if I accept my freedom from you, it will be because you force me to do so, and I will take nothing else—do you hear?—nothing else, either as a gift or as a bequest. You may compel me to accept my freedom—against my will, but nothing else, I swear—I swear!"

Her voice broke suddenly. She pressed her hands against her throat, striving to control her agitation. But she might as well have striven to contend with the previous night's storm; for it shook her, from head to foot it shook her, as a tree is shaken by the tempest.

As for Pierre, before her words were fairly uttered he had leapt to his feet. His hands were clenched. He looked almost as if he would strike her.

"What do you mean?" he thundered.

She could not answer, but still she did not flinch. She only threw out her hands and set them against his breast, holding him from her. Whether or not her eyes spoke for her she never knew, but he became suddenly rigid at her touch, standing motionless, waiting for her with a patience she found well-nigh incredible.

"Tell me," he said at last, and in his voice restraint and passion were strangely mingled, "what is it you are trying to make me understand? In Heaven's name don't be afraid!"

"I am not," she whispered back breathlessly, "believe me, I am not. But oh, Pierre, it's so hard for a woman to tell a man what is in her heart when—when she doesn't even know that he cares to hear."

"Stephanie!" he said. He unclenched his hands, and slowly, very slowly, took her quivering wrists. His eyes would have searched hers, but she was looking at him no longer. Her head was bent. She was crying softly, like a child that has been frightened.

"Stephanie!" he said again.

She made a little movement towards him, hesitated a moment, then went close and hid her face against his breast.

"Oh, do make it easy for me!" she entreated, brokenly. "Do—do try to understand!"

His arms closed about her. He held her tensely against his heart, so that she heard the wild tumult of its beating. But he said nothing whatever. He waited for her still.

And so at last she found strength to turn her face a little upwards and whisper his name.

"Pierre!" And then, with more assurance, "Pierre,

it is true I haven't much to offer you. But such as it is—such as it is—and you asked for it once, remember—will you not take it ? ”

“ Meaning ? ” he said again, and his voice was hoarse and low. It seemed to come through closed lips.

“ Meaning,” she answered him quickly and passionately, “ that revolutionist as you have been, tyrant as you are, you have managed somehow to bind me to you. Oh, I was a fool—a fool—not to marry you long ago at Maritas even though I hated you. I might have known that you would conquer me in the end.”

“ Has it come to that ? ” said Pierre, and there was a queer break in his voice that might have been laughter. “ And have you never asked yourself what made me a revolutionist—and a tyrant ? ”

“ Never,” she murmured.

“ Must I tell you ? ” he said. “ Will you believe me if I do ? ”

She turned her face fully to him, no longer fearing to meet that piercing scrutiny before which she had so often quailed. “ Was it for my sake ? ” she said.

He met her look with eyes that gleamed as steel gleams in red firelight.

“ How else could I have saved you ? ” he said. “ How else could I have been in time ? ”

“ Oh, but you should have told me ! ” she said. “ You should have told me ! ”

“ And if I had,” said Pierre, “ would you have hated me less ? Do you hate me the less now that you know it ? ”

She was silent.

“ Tell me, Stephanie,” he persisted.

Her eyes fell before his.

“ Have I ever hated you ? ” she said, her voice very low.

“ If I did not make you hate me last night,” he said, “ then you never have.”

“ And I never shall,” she supplemented under her breath.

“ That,” said Pierre, “ is another matter. You forget that I am a blackguard.”

Again she heard in his voice that sound that might have been laughter. It thrilled her strangely, seeming in some fashion to convey a message that was beyond words. She turned in his arms, responding instinctively, and clung closely to him.

"I forget everything," she told him very earnestly, "except that to-morrow—or the next day—you will be—my husband."

His arms grew tense about her. She felt his breathing quicken.

"Be careful!" he muttered. "Be careful! Remember, I am not to be trusted."

But she answered him with that laughter that is without fear and more intimate than speech.

"All that is over," she said, and lifted her face to his. And then, more softly, in a voice that quivered and broke, "I trust you with my whole heart. And Pierre—my Pierre—you will never again—kiss me—against my will!"

WHERE THE HEART IS

"Of course, I know that a quiet, well-meanin' fool like myself hasn't much of a chance with women, but I just thought I'd give you the opportunity of refusin' me, and then we should know where we were."

It was leisurely uttered, and without any hint of agitation. The speaker was lying on his back at the end of a long, green lawn. His hat was over the upper part of his face, leaving only his mouth visible. It was a singularly kindly mouth. Some critics called it weak, though there was no sign of nervousness about it. The clean lips made their statement without faltering, and without apparent effort, and, having spoken, relaxed into a faint smile that was pleasantly devoid of self-consciousness.

The girl at whose side he lay listened with a slight frown between her eyes. She was quivering inwardly with embarrassment, but she would have died sooner than have betrayed it. The shyest child found it hard to be shy with Tots Waring. His full name was Tottenham, but nobody dreamed of using it. From his cradle onwards he had been Tots to all who knew him. His proposal was followed by a very decided pause. Then, still frowning, the girl spoke.

"Is it a joke?"

"Never made a joke in my life," said Tots.

"Then why don't you do it properly?"

There was a decided touch of irritation in the question. The girl was leaning slightly forward, her hands clasped round her knee. Her black brows looked decidedly uncompromising, and there was a faintly contemptuous twist about her upper lip.

"Don't be vexed!" pleaded Tots. "I suppose you know by experience how these things are managed, but I don't. You see, it's my first attempt."

Unwillingly, as it were in spite of itself, the contemptuous curve became a very small smile. The girl's dark eyes dwelt for several seconds upon that portion of her suitor's countenance that was visible under the linen hat. There was a wonderful serenity about the mouth and chin she studied. They did not look in the least as if their owner were taking either himself or her seriously. Her own lips tightened a little, and a sudden gleam shot up behind her black lashes—a gleam that had in it an elusive glint of malice. She suffered her eyes to pass beyond him and to rest upon a distant line of firs. The man stretched out beside her remained motionless.

"Why," she said at last, with slight hesitation, "should you take it for granted that I should refuse you?"

"Eh?" said Tots. He stirred languidly, and removed the hat from his face, but he still maintained his easy attitude. He had heavy-lidded eyes, upon the colour of which most people disagreed—eyes that never appeared critical, and yet were somehow not wholly in keeping with the kindly, half-whimsical mouth. "I'm not takin' it for granted," he said. "I only think it likely. You see, all I have to go upon is this: Every one hereabouts is gettin' married or engaged, except you and me. That, of course, is all right for them, but it isn't precisely excitin' for us. I thought it might be more fun for both of us if we did the same. At least, I thought I'd find out your opinion about it, and act accordin'ly. If we don't see alike about it, of course, there's no more to be said. We'll just go on as we were before, and hope that somethin' else nice will turn up soon."

"To relieve our mutual boredom!" The girl's laugh sounded rather hard. "Don't you think," she asked, after a moment, "that we should bore each other even worse if we got engaged?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Tots laughed too—an easy, tolerant laugh. "Could but try, eh?" he suggested. "I'm tired of this everlastin' lookin' on."

"So am I—horribly tired." The girl rose suddenly, with a movement curiously vehement. "But I shouldn't have thought you'd care," she said, with a touch of bitterness. "I should have thought a bovine existence suited you."

Tots sat up deliberately and put on his hat. His manner betrayed no resentment.

"Really?" he said, with his pleasant smile. "You see, one never knows."

He reached up a hand to her, and, wondering a little at herself, she gave him her own to assist him to rise.

He got to his feet and stood before her—a loose-limbed, awkward figure that towered above her, making her feel rather small.

"It's done, then, is it?" he questioned, still keeping her hand in his.

She looked up at him with a nervous laugh. Secretly she was wondering how far he was going to carry the joke.

"Why, of course," she said. "Can you imagine any sane woman refusing such a magnificent offer?"

Though she suffered that ring of mockery in her voice, she was still thinking as she spoke that it would serve him right if she frightened him well by letting him imagine that she was taking him seriously.

"Good!" said Tots, in the tone of one well pleased with his bargain. "It shall be my business to see that you do not regret it."

And with the words he drew her hand through his arm, laughing back at her with baffling complacence, and led her down the long lawn with the air of one who had taken possession.

* * * * *

Ruth Carey had been accustomed to fend for herself nearly all her life. Her lot had been cast in a very narrow groove, and it had not contained a single gleam of romance to make it beautiful. The whole of her early girlhood had been spent buried in a country vicarage, utterly out of touch with all the rest of the

world. Here she had lived with her grandfather, leading a wild and free existence, wholly independent of society, hewing, as it were, a way for herself in a desert that was very empty and almost unthinkably barren.

Then, when she was eight-and-twenty, a silent, curiously undeveloped woman, the inevitable change had come. Her grandfather had died, and she had gone out at last beyond the sky-line of her desert into the crowded thoroughfares of men.

The gay crowd of cousins with whom she made her home found her unattractive, and took no special pains to discover further. They were all younger than she was, and full to the brim of their own various interests. Of the five girls, three were already engaged, and one was on the eve of marriage.

It was at this juncture that Tots had lounged into Ruth's consideration and proposed himself as a candidate for her favour.

Tots was a familiar friend of the family. Every one liked him in a tolerant, joking sort of way. No one took him seriously. He was to act as best man at the forthcoming wedding, being a near friend and the host of the bridegroom.

Uniformly kind to man and beast, he had made himself lazily pleasant to the unattractive cousin. Circumstance had thrown them a good deal together, and he had not quarrelled with circumstance. He had acquiesced with a smile.

He made it appear in some fashion absurd that they should not at least be friends, and then, having gained that much, he astounded her by proposing to her. It was a preposterous situation. Having at length freed herself from him, she escaped to the house to review it with burning cheeks. It was nothing but a joke, of course—of course, however he might repudiate the fact, and she resented it with all her might. She would teach him that such jokes were not to be played upon her with impunity. She had no one to defend her from this species of insult. She would defend herself. She would fool him as he sought to fool her.

But there was a yet more painful ordeal in store for her that night in the billiard-room, had she but known it. The morrow's bridegroom, Fred Danvers, having failed to execute an easy shot, some one accused him of possessing shaky nerves.

"You'll never get through to-morrow if you can't do an easy thing like that," was the laughing remark.

Tots looked up.

"Oh, rot! The bridegroom has no business to suffer with the jumps. That's the best man's privilege. He does all the work, and has all the responsibility. Why, I'm shakin' in my shoes whenever I think of to-morrow, but if it were my own weddin' I shouldn't turn a hair."

Young Danvers guffawed at this.

"Bet you'll turn the colour of this table when the time comes, if it ever does come, which I doubt!"

"Why?" questioned Tots.

Danvers laughed again, enjoying the joke. Tots was always more or less of a butt to his friends.

"In the first place, you'd never have the courage or the energy to propose. In the second, no girl would ever take you seriously. In the third——"

He broke off, struck silent by a wholly unexpected display of energy on the part of Tots, who had suddenly hurled a piece of chalk at him from the other end of the room. It hit him smartly on the shoulder, leaving a white patch to testify to the excellence of Tots's aim.

"I beg your pardon," said Tots mildly. "But you really shouldn't talk such rot, particularly in the presence of my fiancée."

He turned round to Ruth, who was shrinking into a corner behind him, and with a courtly gesture drew her forward.

"In the first place," he said, addressing the assembled company with a good-humoured smile, "I had the courage and the energy to propose only this afternoon. In the second place, this lady did me the inestimable favour of takin' me seriously. And in the third place, we're goin' to get married as soon as possible."

In the astounded silence that followed these an-

nouncements, he stooped, with no exaggeration of reverence, and kissed the icy, trembling hand he held.

* * * * *

Ruth never knew afterwards how she came through those terrible moments. She was as one horror-stricken into acquiescence. She scarcely heard the nightmare buzz of congratulation all about her. The only thing of which she was vividly conscious, over and above her dumb anguish of consternation, was the fast grip of Tots' hand. It seemed to hold her up, to sustain her, while the very soul of her was ready to faint with dismay.

She did not even remember later how she effected her escape at last, but she had a vague impression that Tots managed it for her. It was all very dreadful and incomprehensible. She felt as if she were suddenly caught in a trap from which there could never be any escape. And she was terrified beyond all reason.

All the night she lay awake, turning the matter over and over, but in every respect it presented to her a problem too complicated for her solution. When morning came she was tired out physically and mentally, conscious only of an ardent desire to flee from her perplexities.

Her cousin's wedding occupied the minds of all, and she spent the earlier hours in comparative peace in the bustle of preparation. She saw nothing of Tots, and she hoped his responsibilities would keep him too busy to spare her any of his attention.

Vain hope! When she went to her room to don her bridesmaid's dress, she found a small parcel awaiting her. With a sinking heart, she opened it, a jeweller's box with a strip of paper wound about it. The paper contained a message in four words: "With love from Tots."

A wild tumult arose within her, and her fingers shook so that she could scarcely remove the lid of the box. Succumbing at length, she stood motionless, staring with wide, scared eyes at the ring that lay shining in the sunlight, as though she beheld some evil charm. The

diamonds flashed in her eyes and dazzled her, making her see nothing but tiny pin-points of intolerable light. Her heart thumped and raced as though it would choke her. Unconsciously she gasped for breath. That ring was to her another bar in the door of her prison-house.

At an urgent call from one of her cousins, she started and almost threw the box, with its contents, into a drawer. Feverishly she began to dress. It was much later than she had realised. When she appeared in the hall with the other bridesmaids, some one remarked upon her deathly pallor, but she shrunk away behind the bride, anxious only to screen herself from observation. She would have given all she had to have avoided Tots just then, but there was no escape for her. He was in the church-porch as she entered it, though there was no time for more than a hurried hand clasp.

The church was very hot, and the crush of guests great. She listened to the marriage service as a prisoner might listen to his death sentence. The irrevocability of it was anguish to her tortured imagination. And all the while she was conscious—vividly, terribly conscious—of Tots' presence, Tots' inscrutable scrutiny, Tots' triumph of possession. He would never let her go, she felt. She was his beyond all dispute. He had asked, and she had bestowed, not understanding what she was doing.

There could be no withdrawal now. She could not picture herself asking for it, and she was sure he would not grant it if she did. He would only laugh.

There fell a sudden silence in the church—a curious, unnatural silence. It seemed to be growing very dark, and she wondered, panting, if it were the darkness that so smothered her. With a sharp movement she lifted her face, gasping as a half-drowned person gasps. And everywhere above, around her, were tiny, dancing points of light.

* * * * *

"That's better," said Tots. "Don't be frightened. It's all right."

He rubbed her cheek softly, reassuringly, and then fell to chafing her weak hands. Ruth lay back against a grave-mound and stared at him. He was wonderfully gentle with her, almost like a woman. On her other side one of her fellow-bridesmaids was stooping over her, holding a glass of water.

"You fainted from the heat," she explained. "But you are better now. I shouldn't go back if I were you. It's just over."

With a sense of shame Ruth withdrew her hand from Tots.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Nonsense!" said Tots kindly. "Nobody's blamin' you, my child. It's this infernal heat. You stay quietly here for a bit. I must go back and see that Danvers signs his name all right. But I'll come and fetch you afterwards."

He departed, and Ruth suddenly realised an urgent need for solitude. She turned to her cousin.

"Do, please, go! I shall be all right. It is cool and shady here. And they will be looking for you in the vestry. Please go! I will wait till—Tots comes back."

Her cousin demurred a little, but it was obvious that her inclination fell in with Ruth's request, and it was also quite obvious that Ruth did not want her. So, after some persuasion, she yielded and went.

During the interval that followed, Ruth sat in the quiet corner just out of sight of the vestry door, bracing herself to meet Tots and implore him to set her free. It was a bad quarter of an hour for her, and when, at the end of it, Tots came, she looked on the verge of fainting again.

"Sorry I couldn't come before," said Tots. "But my responsibilities are over now, thank the gods. I suppose, now, you didn't have time for anything to eat before you came?"

This was the actual truth. Ruth owned it with a feeling of guilt. And suddenly she found that she could not speak then. There was something that made it impossible. Perhaps it was the loud clash of the bells overhead.

seem to matter in the face of her great need what they thought.

But a note to Tots was a different matter altogether, and she sat for nearly two hours motionless above a sheet of paper, considering. In the end she was again overcome by the almost physical impossibility of putting the intolerable situation into bald words. Simply, she felt utterly incapable of dealing with it. He had told her he was not joking. She had believed the contrary in spite of this assurance. And she had dared to trifle with him, to treat his offer as a jest.

How could she explain, how apologise, for such a mistake as this? The thing was beyond words, and at length she gave up the attempt in despair. She would send him back his ring in silence, and perhaps he would understand. At least, he would know that she was unworthy of that which he had offered her. She took the ring from its hiding-place, and once more the sunlight flashed upon its stones. For a space she stood gazing fixedly, as one fascinated. And then, suddenly, inexplicably, her eyes filled with tears, and she packed up the little box hurriedly with fingers that trembled.

She directed the parcel to Tots, and put it aside with the intention of posting it herself. A tiny strip of paper on the floor attracted her attention as she turned. She picked it up. It was only Tots' simple message in four short words. She caught her breath sharply as she slipped it into her dress. . . .

Home! Ruth Carey stood in the little inn-parlour that smelt of honeysuckle and stale tobacco, and looked across the village street. It looked even narrower than in the old days, and the pond on the green had shrunk to a mere dark puddle. The old grey church on the hill looked like a child's toy, and the quiet that brooded everywhere was the quiet of stagnation. An ancient dog was lumping down the road—the only living thing in sight.

The girl turned from the window with a heavy sigh. She was conscious of a great emptiness, of a craving too intense to be silenced, a feverish longing that had

"Fire away!" said Tots.

"I want to know—I want to know——" She stumbled again, and broke off in distress.

Tots wheeled round as he sat, and brought his long legs into the room.

"Please don't," she begged hastily. "I—I don't want you inside."

He did not retire again, nor did he advance.

"You want to know——" he said.

With a stupendous effort she faced and answered him.

"I want to know what made you ask me to marry you."

Tots did not at once reply. He sat on his perch, with his back to the light, and contemplated her.

"I should have thought a clever little girl like you might have guessed that," he said at length.

This was intolerable. She felt her courage ebbing fast.

"I'm not clever," she said, a desperate quiver in her voice, "and I—I'm not good at guessing riddles."

In the silence that followed, she wondered wildly if she had made him angry at last. Then he spoke in his usual good-natured drawl, and her heart gave a great throb of relief.

"I think you're chaffin'," he said.

"I'm not," she assured him feverishly. "I'm not indeed. I always mean what I say. That is——"

"Of course," said Tots, with kindly reassurance.

"I knew that. Why, my dear child, that's just what made me do it. I took a likin' to you for that very reason."

She stared at him speechlessly. There was absolutely nothing left to say. He really cared for her, it seemed. He really cared! And she? With a gasp of despair she abandoned the unequal strife, and hid her face from him in an agony of tears. Why, why, why, had this knowledge come to her so late?

He was by her side in an instant, stroking, soothing, comforting her, as though she had been a child. When she partially recovered herself her head was against his shoulder, and he was drying her eyes clumsily but tenderly with his own handkerchief.

"Fire away!" said Tots.

"I want to know—I want to know——" She stumbled again, and broke off in distress.

Tots wheeled round as he sat, and brought his long legs into the room.

"Please don't," she begged hastily. "I—I don't want you inside."

He did not retire again, nor did he advance.

"You want to know——" he said.

With a stupendous effort she faced and answered him.

"I want to know what made you ask me to marry you."

Tots did not at once reply. He sat on his perch, with his back to the light, and contemplated her.

"I should have thought a clever little girl like you might have guessed that," he said at length.

This was intolerable. She felt her courage ebbing fast.

"I'm not clever," she said, a desperate quiver in her voice, "and I—I'm not good at guessing riddles."

In the silence that followed, she wondered wildly if she had made him angry at last. Then he spoke in his usual good-natured drawl, and her heart gave a great throb of relief.

"I think you're chaffin'," he said.

"I'm not," she assured him feverishly. "I'm not indeed. I always mean what I say. That is——"

"Of course," said Tots, with kindly reassurance.

"I knew that. Why, my dear child, that's just what made me do it. I took a likin' to you for that very reason."

She stared at him speechlessly. There was absolutely nothing left to say. He really cared for her, it seemed. He really cared! And she? With a gasp of despair she abandoned the unequal strife, and hid her face from him in an agony of tears. Why, why, why, had this knowledge come to her so late?

He was by her side in an instant, stroking, soothing, comforting her, as though she had been a child. When she partially recovered herself her head was against his shoulder, and he was drying her eyes clumsily but tenderly with his own handkerchief.

